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— Frank Miller

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KAZUO KOIKE & GOSEKI KOJIMA

LONE WOLF AND CUB

DARK HORSE COMICS®

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VOLUME 1

THE ASSASSIN'S ROAD

By KAZUO KOIKE & GOSEKI KOJIMA

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DANA LEWIS

lettering & retouch
DIGITAL CHAMELEON

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THE ASSASSIN'S ROAD

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By KAZUO KOIKE
& GOSEKI KOJIMA

VOLUME

1

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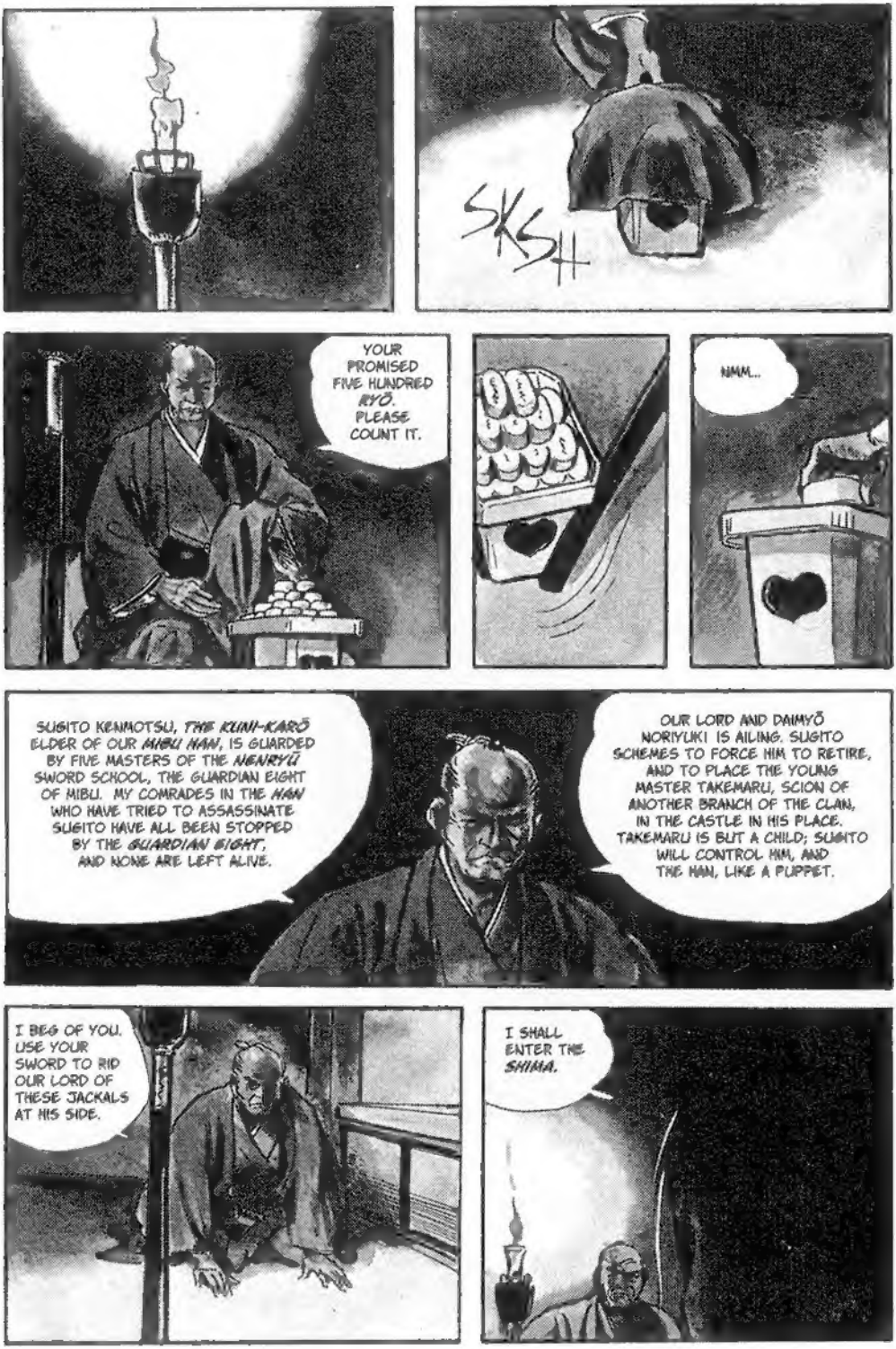
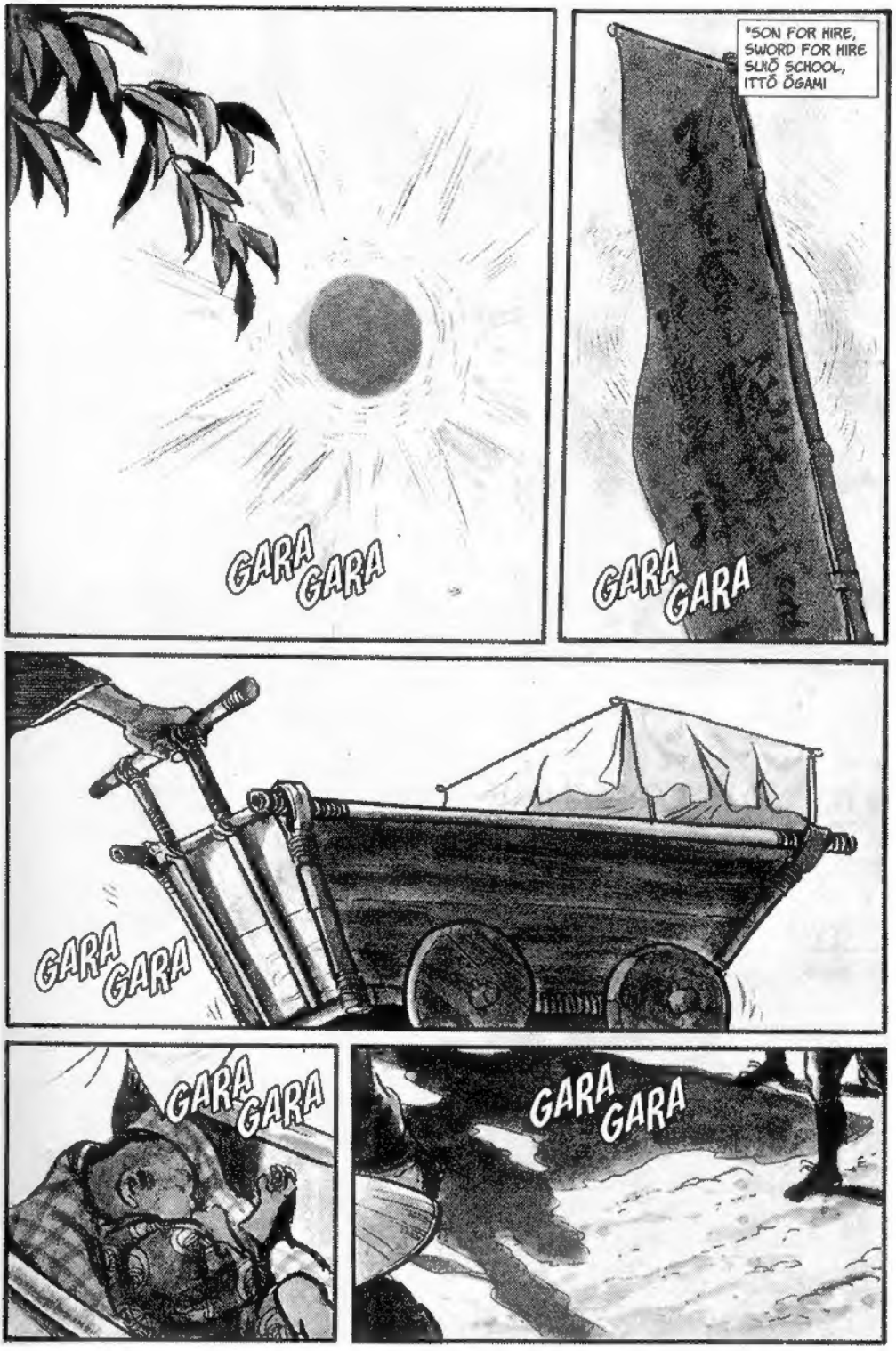
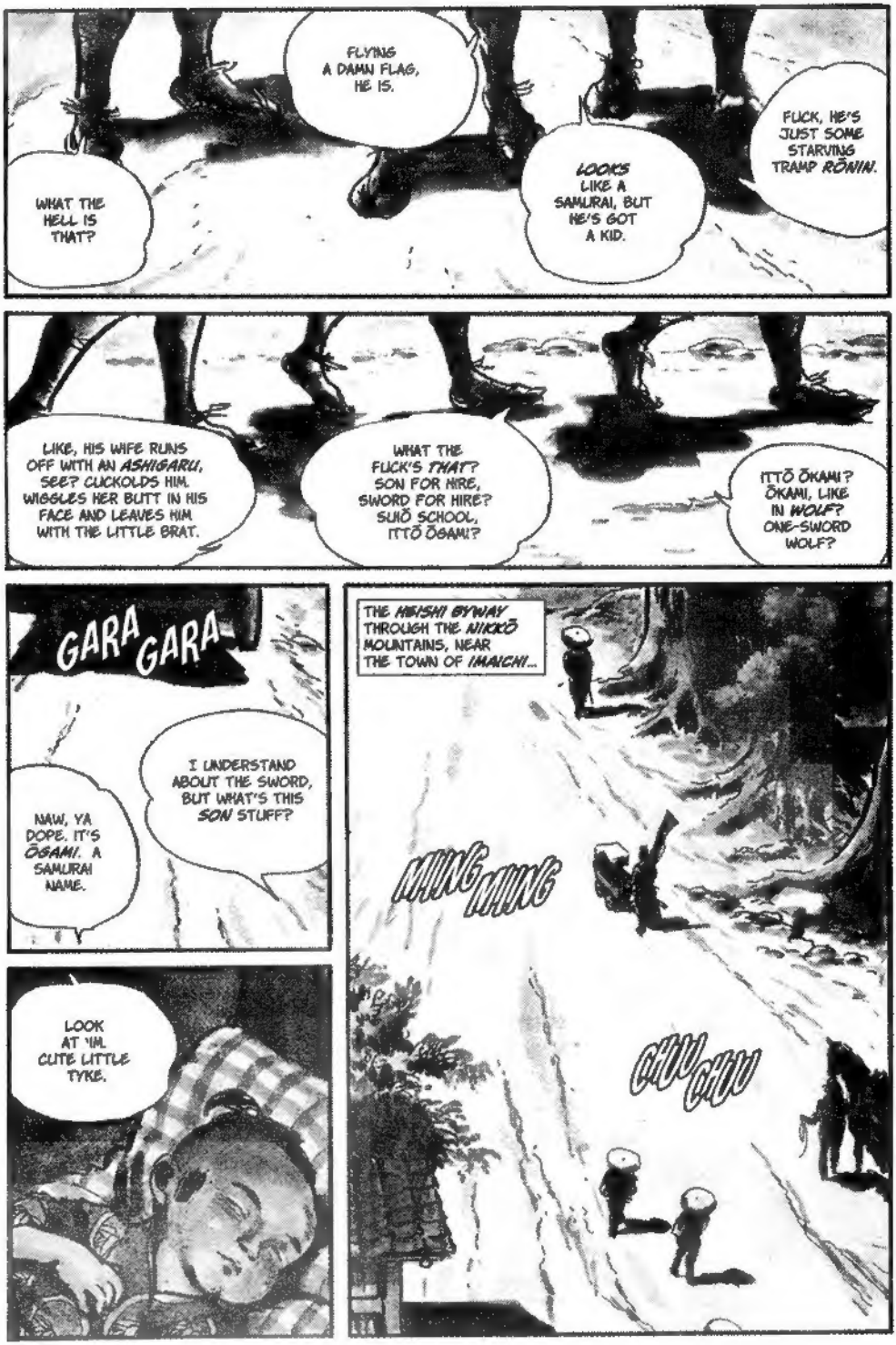
Son for Hire, Sword for Hire

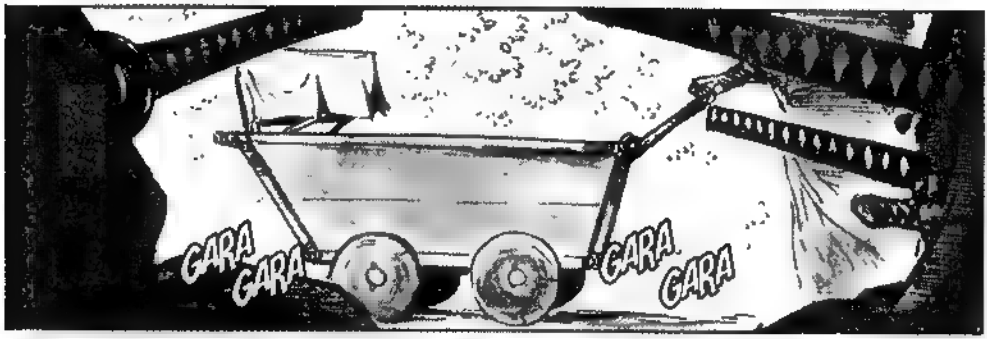

SKSH
YOUR PROMISED FIVE HUNDRED RYŌ. PLEASE COUNT IT.
NMM...
SUGITO KENMOTSU, THE KUNI-KARŌ ELDER OF OUR MIBU HAN, IS GUARDED BY FIVE MASTERS OF THE HENRYŪ SWORD SCHOOL, THE GUARDIAN EIGHT OF MIBU. MY COMRADES IN THE HAN WHO HAVE TRIED TO ASSASSINATE SUGITO HAVE ALL BEEN STOPPED BY THE GUARDIAN EIGHT, AND NONE ARE LEFT ALIVE.
OUR LORD AND DAIMYŌ NORIYUKI IS AILING. SUGITO SCHEMES TO FORCE HIM TO RETIRE, AND TO PLACE THE YOUNG MASTER TAKEMARU, SCION OF ANOTHER BRANCH OF THE CLAN, IN THE CASTLE IN HIS PLACE. TAKEMARU IS BUT A CHILD; SUGITO WILL CONTROL HIM, AND THE HAN, LIKE A PUPPET.
I BEG OF YOU. USE YOUR SWORD TO RID OUR LORD OF THESE JACKALS AT HIS SIDE.
I SHALL ENTER THE SHIMA.


GARA GARA
*SON FOR HIRE, SWORD FOR HIRE SUIŌ SCHOOL, ITTŌ ŌGAMI
GARA GARA
GARA GARA
GARA GARA
GARA GARA


WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?
FLYING A DAMN FLAG, HE IS.
LOOKS LIKE A SAMURAI, BUT HE'S GOT A KID.
FUCK, HE'S JUST SOME STARVING TRAMP RŌNIN.
LIKE, HIS WIFE RUNS OFF WITH AN ASHIGARU, SEE? CUCKOLDS HIM. WIGGLES HER BUTT IN HIS FACE AND LEAVES HIM WITH THE LITTLE BRAT.
WHAT THE FUCK'S THAT? SON FOR HIRE, SWORD FOR HIRE? SUIŌ SCHOOL, ITTŌ ŌGAMI?
ITTŌ ŌKAMI? ŌKAMI, LIKE IN WOLF? ONE-SWORD WOLF?
GARA GARA
NAW, YA DOPE. IT'S ŌGAMI. A SAMURAI NAME.
I UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE SWORD, BUT WHAT'S THIS SON STUFF?
LOOK AT 'IM. CUTE LITTLE TYKE.
THE HIKISHI BYWAY THROUGH THE NIKKŌ MOUNTAINS, NEAR THE TOWN OF IMAICHI...
MUNG MUNG
CHU CHU

"ASSASSIN DISPATCHED FROM EDO. NAME, UNKNOWN. AGE, UNKNOWN. SWORD SCHOOL, WEAPONS, ALL UNKNOWN. HAVE CONFIRMED THAT HE TRAVELS WITH SMALL CHILD. FROM THIS, HE IS OFTEN CALLED...
"LONE WOLF AND CUB. HE IS SAID TO BE HIGHLY DANGEROUS. TAKE IMMEDIATE PRECAUTIONS..."
I SEE...
AN ASSASSIN WITH A CHILD.
HEH HEH HEH... HE THOUGHT THAT WOULD THROW US OFF, BUT NOW THAT WE'VE BROKEN HIS DISGUISE, HE'S TRAPPED.

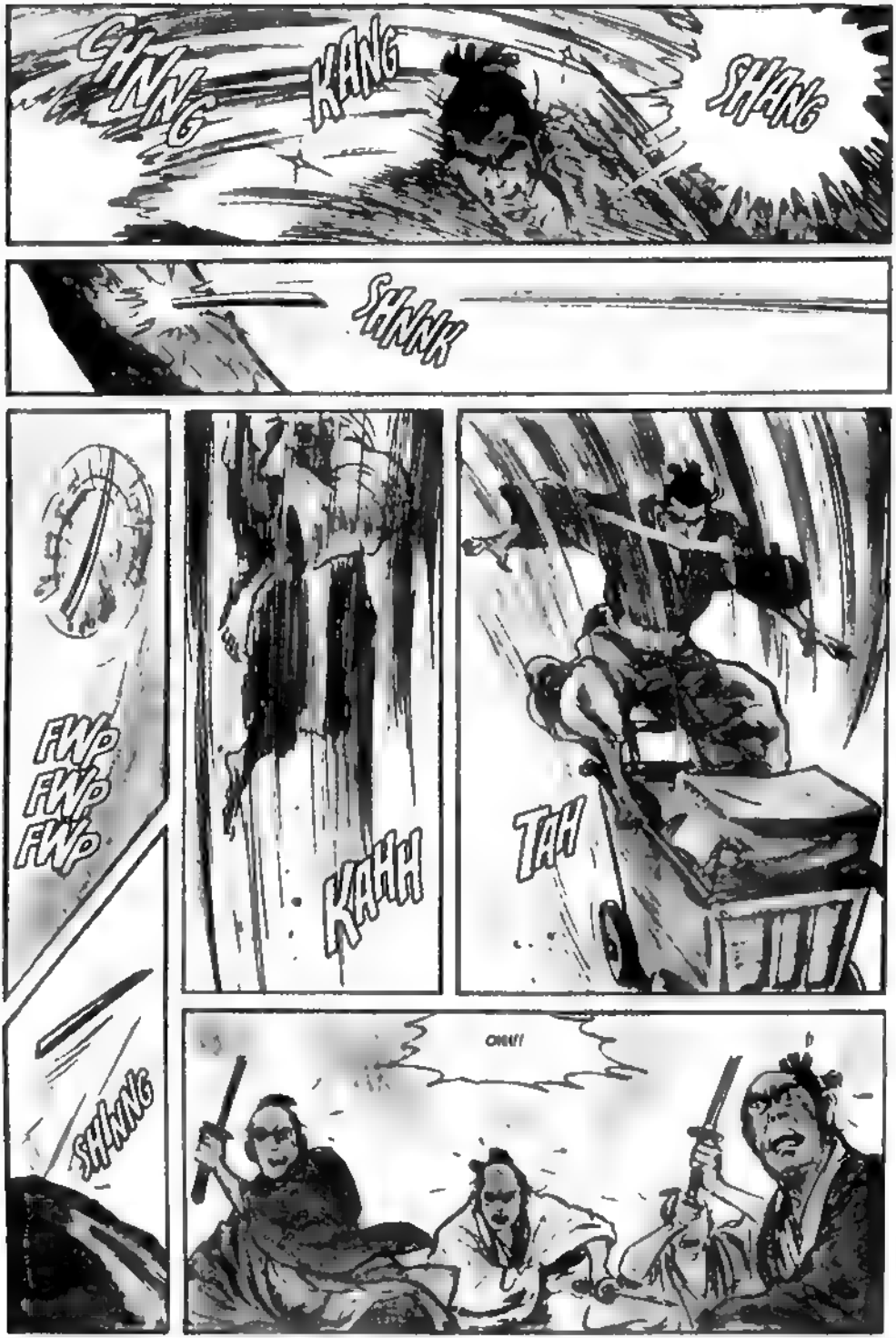
HAVING A KID ALONG WILL SHACKLE HIM, HAND AND FOOT... LONE WOLF AND CUB?! DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH!
IF WE CAN TAKE HIM PRISONER AS OUR LORD ELDER SUGITO COMMANDS, AND FORCE HIM TO NAME HIS EMPLOYER, WE'LL HAVE UNSHAKEABLE EVIDENCE AGAINST THE EDO-ELDER.
WE JUST SAY EDO SENT HIM TO ASSASSINATE YOUNG LORD TAKEMARU.
MIBU'S THIRTY THOUSAND KOKU WILL BE IN THE PALM OF OUR LORD ELDER'S HAND. HEH HEH HEH...
GENSAI AND HIS MEN SHOULD BE SPRINGING THE TRAP RIGHT NOW...
INDEED...
GARA GARA GARA


GARA
GARA
GARA
GARA

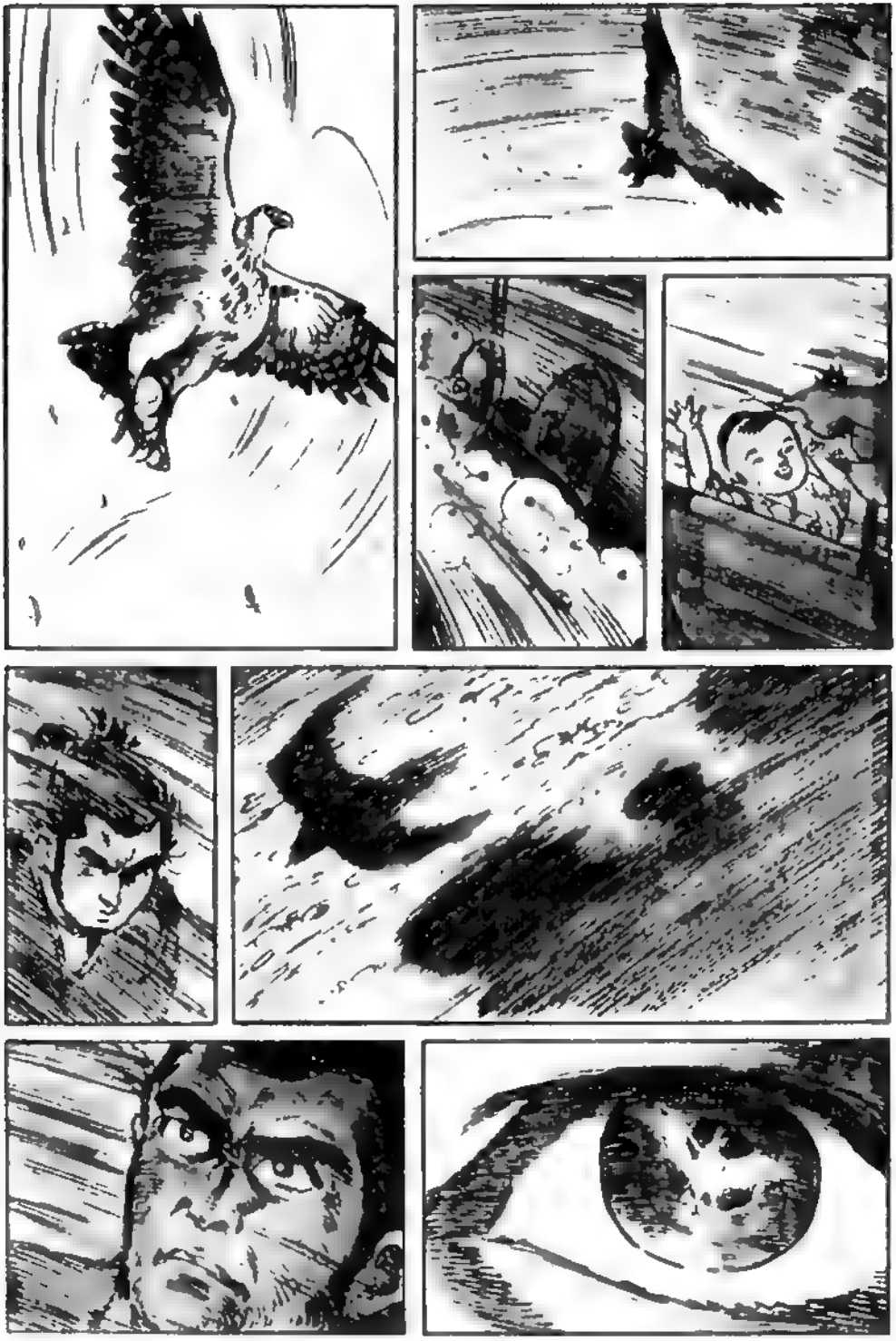
IS THAT YOUR CHILD, SIR?
HE IS.
HOH...

...
SOME THING YOU WANT?
I HAVE A BOY THE SAME AGE AS YOURS HAVEN'T SEEN HIM FOR AWES WILL YOU LET ME JUST HOLD HIM FOR A MINUTE TO EASE MY HEART ON THIS JOURNEY? OF COURSE I'LL PAY YOU HANDSOMELY
MY SWIN DOESN'T LIE BUT THE BOY SAYS HE DOESN'T LIKE YOU
WHAT?!
HE SAYS YOU SMELL OF MURDER. CHILDREN ARE PURE AT HEART THEY PICK UP ON THINGS LIKE THAT
CHKK
WHW

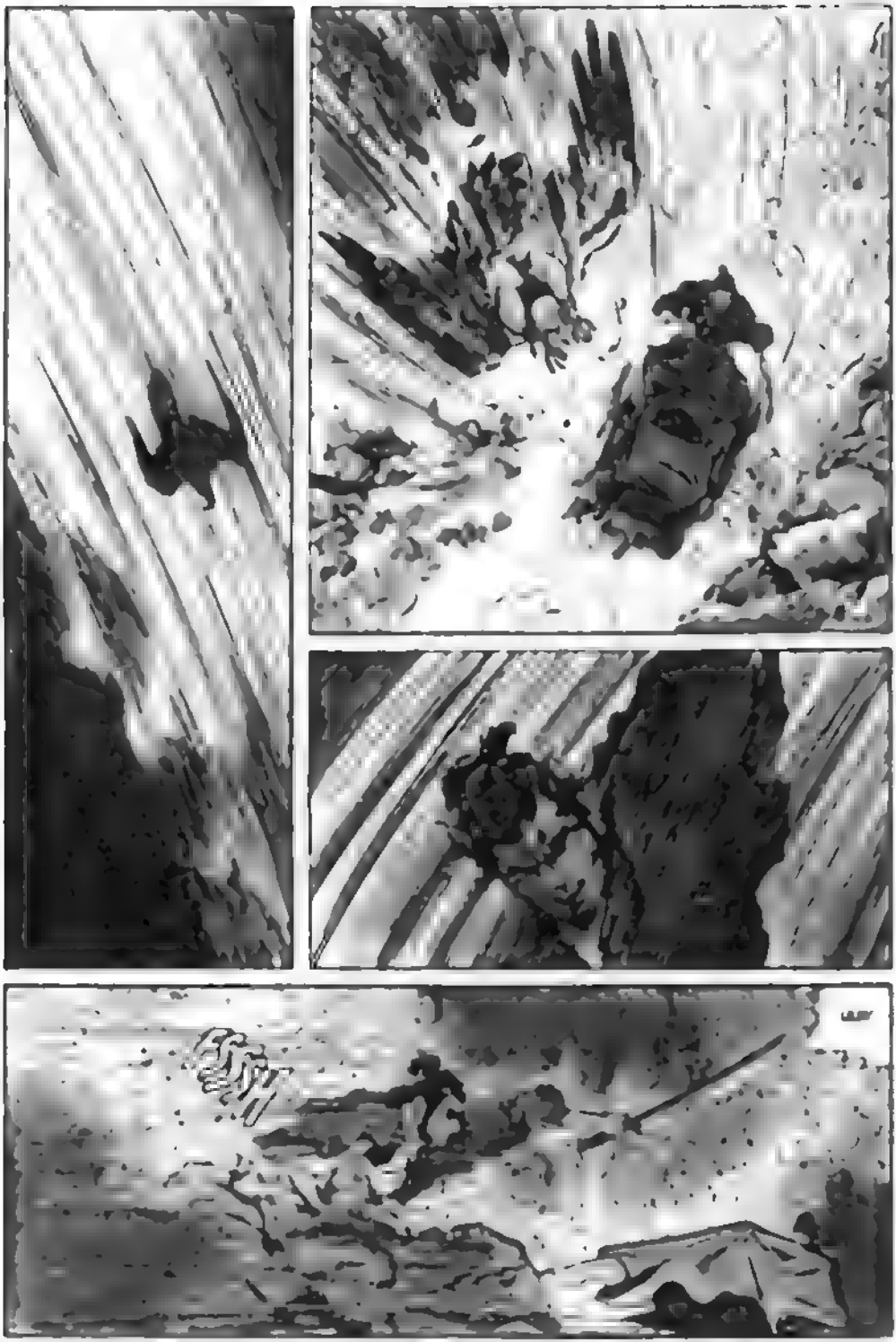
KILL HIM!


CHNG
KANG
SHANG
SHNNK
FWP
FWP
FWP
KAHH
TAH
SHING
OKU!!

GARA GARA
GARA GARA
Ahhh!
DID YOU SEE THAT?



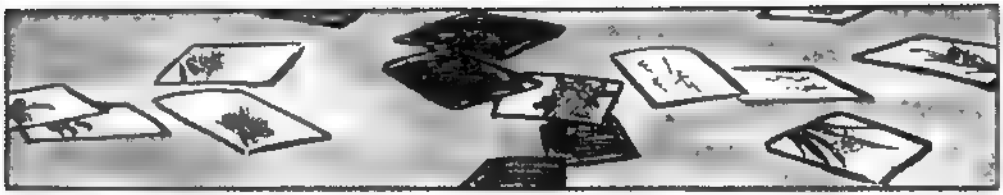
THE NEARYU SCHOOL INSIDE WING EYE ATTACK!
WE ENTER THE SANADA!
PATIENCE, DAIGORO!
LEAVE!
GARA GARA



SWISH
THP
YOUR SON'S EYES

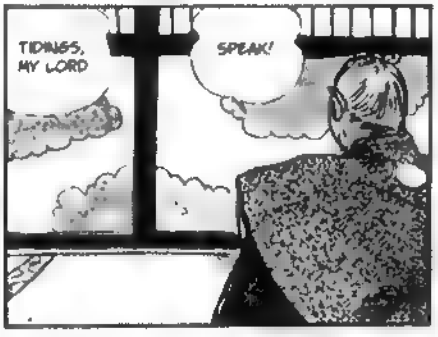
Rahh!
CHAK!
DESIST! WHAT CAN YOU DO WITHOUT YOUR EYESIGHT?
THOSE EYES OF YOURS WON'T OPEN AGAIN FOR HOURS
YOU... YOU BASTARDS! WHO ARE YOU? WHY DID YOU ATTACK US?
HEH HEH HEH. I SHOULD THINK YOU WOULD KNOW THAT BETTER THAN ANYONE... YOU, THE ASSASSIN.
DROP YOUR PRETENSE! ME KNOW WITH US
DROP IT!
CHHRING
* JUSTAMBA NO KAMI. THE CASTLE TOWN OF THE THIRTY THOUSAND KOKKU MIKU HAN.

FWWP
FWWP



HAH HAH HAH.
THE YOUNG LORD MUST BE BORED, PLAYING THE SAME GAMES DAY AFTER DAY
THE CASTLE *HONMARU* IS MUCH MORE SPACIOUS AND YOUR ATTENDANTS THERE WILL PLAY WITH YOU WHENEVER YOU COMMAND

YES, THAT DAY WILL SOON COME. THIS WHOLE CASTLE WILL BE *YOURS* YOUNG LORD
AND YOUR OLD UNCLE'S, TOO HAH HAH..


TIDINGS, MY LORD
SPEAK!

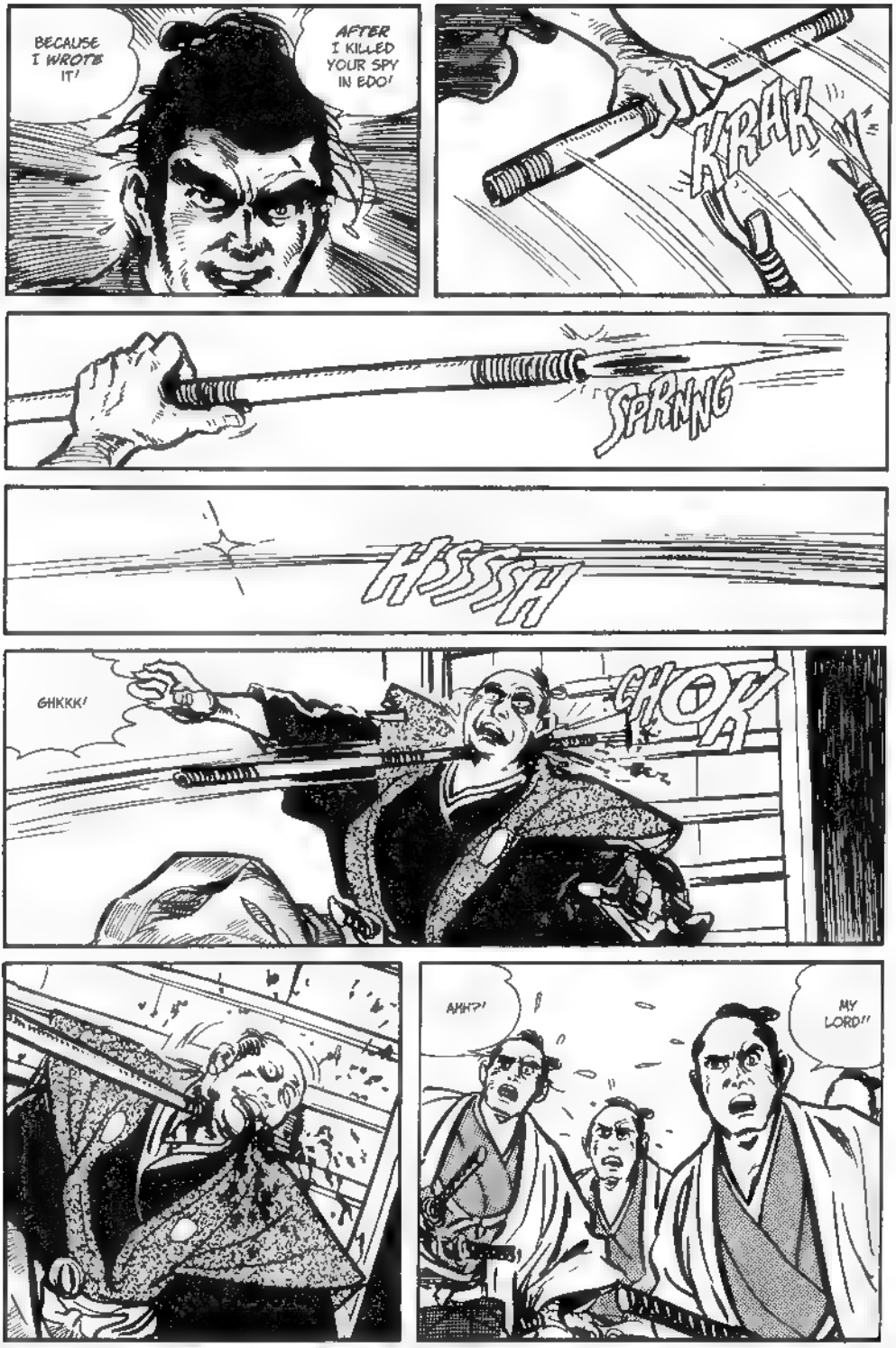
THE ASSASSIN OF WHICH WE HEARD FROM EDO HE'S.
WHAT IS IT?!

I *SEE* YOU *GOT* HIM. GOOD WORK!

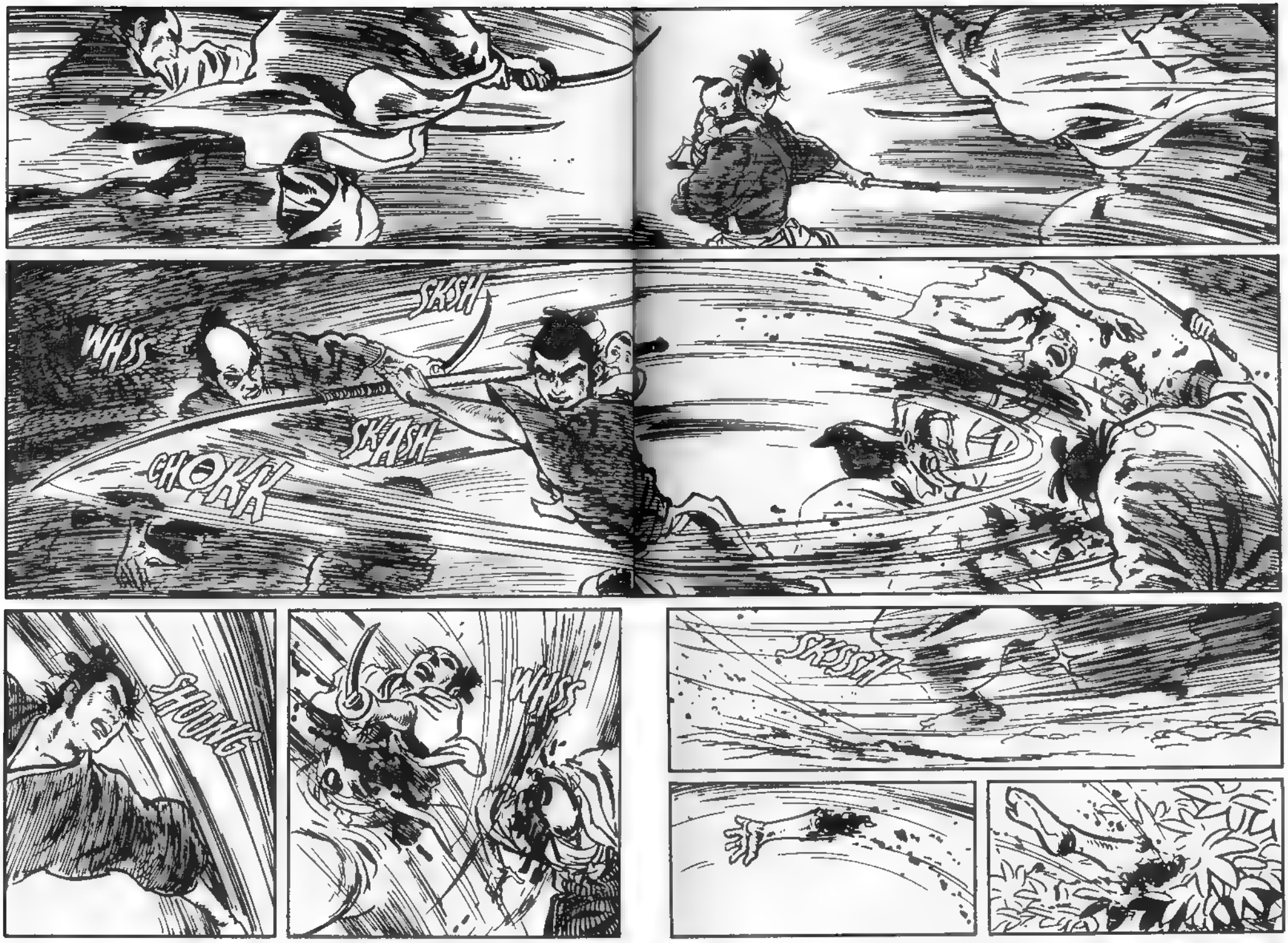
HOH! SO THIS IS OUR MAN.
HOW ABOUT IT, FELLOW TELL US ALL YOU KNOW, AND WE'LL LET YOU LIVE. WE TREAT OUR WITNESSES WELL
THINK OF YOUR CUTE CHILD
SPEAK! WHO HIRED YOU?
SPIT IT OUT! WHAT'S THE NAME OF THE MAN WHO HIRED YOU, ASSASSIN?
IT'S ABOUT TIME FOR PEE
W - WHAT?!

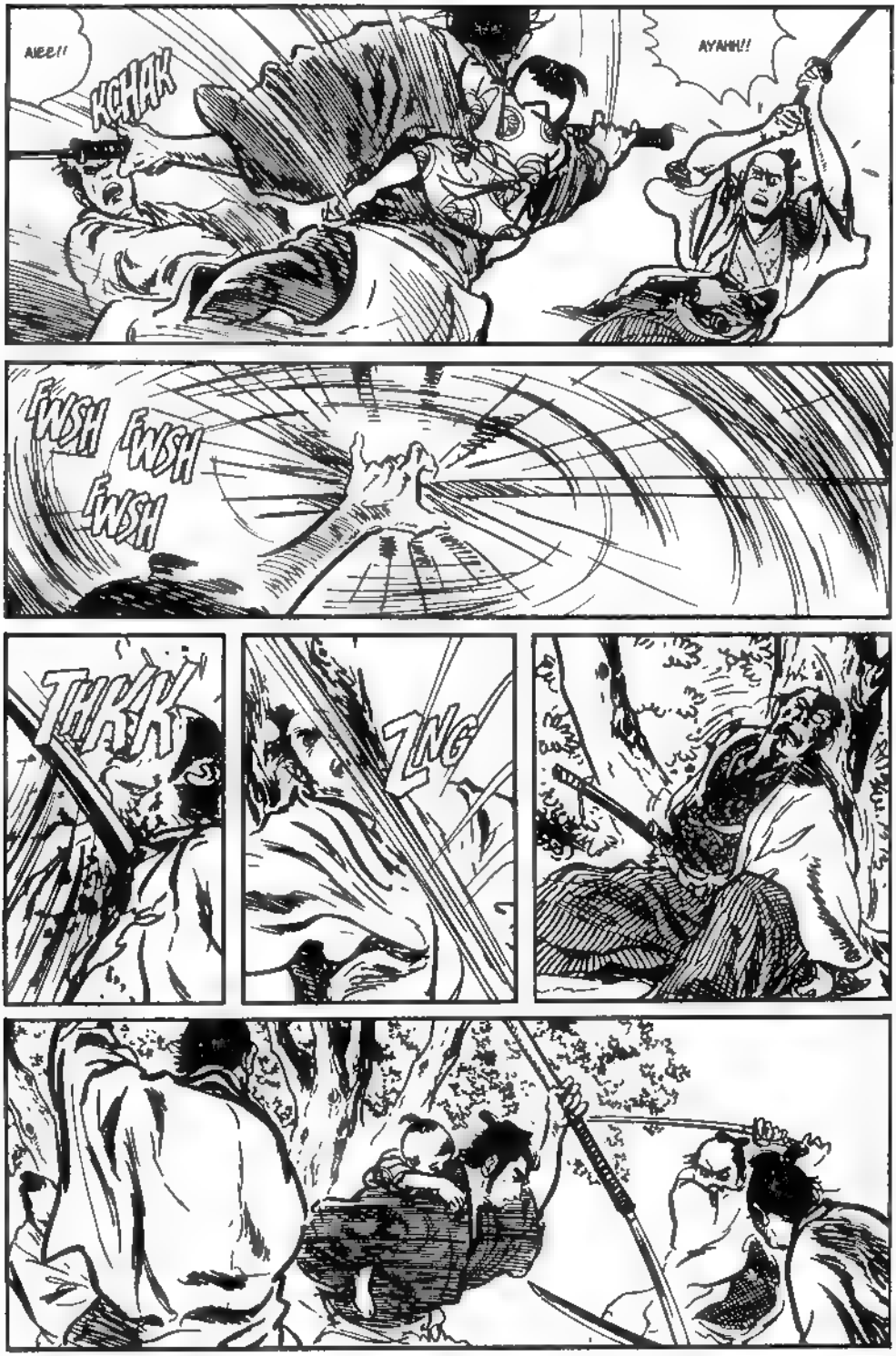
I MEAN MY BOY WOULD SOMEONE TAKE HIM TO THE TOILET? I DON'T WANT HIM FOULING THE GARDEN
FORGET THAT!
LET HIM PEE! WE'VE SPEAK!
DO YOU NEED TO PEE?
WAHAHH!!
DAMN IT! SHUT UP ALREADY!
ALL RIGHT! LET HIM GO.

BE QUICK ABOUT IT!
PEE-PEE, DAIGORO. PEE-PEE.
THERE. THAT'S DONE.
AND SO, TELL ME.
HOW DID YOU KNOW I WAS AN ASSASSIN?
WE HAVE OUR SPIES THROUGHOUT EDO. ONE SENT US A WARNING BY [redacted]
"ASSASSIN DISPATCHED FROM EDO NAME, UNKNOWN. AGE, UNKNOWN. SWORD SCHOOL, WEAPONS, ALL UNKNOWN.
"HAVE CONFIRMED THAT HE TRAVELS WITH SMALL CHILD
"FROM THIS HE IS OFTEN CALLED... LONE WOLF AND CUB..."
THE DEVIL!
HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT?!


BECAUSE I WROTE IT!
AFTER I KILLED YOUR SPY IN EDO!
KRAK
SPRNNG
HSSSH
GHKKK!
CHOK
AHH?!
MY LORD!!

KRAK
SHKK
DAHA!!
CURSE YOU!


WHSS
SKSH
SKASH
CHOKK
SHUNG
WHSS
SKSSH


AIEE!!
KCHAK
AYAHH!!
FWSH FWSH FWSH
THKK
ZNG

THDD
WHDD
KRRRK
KRRRK
KSHASH

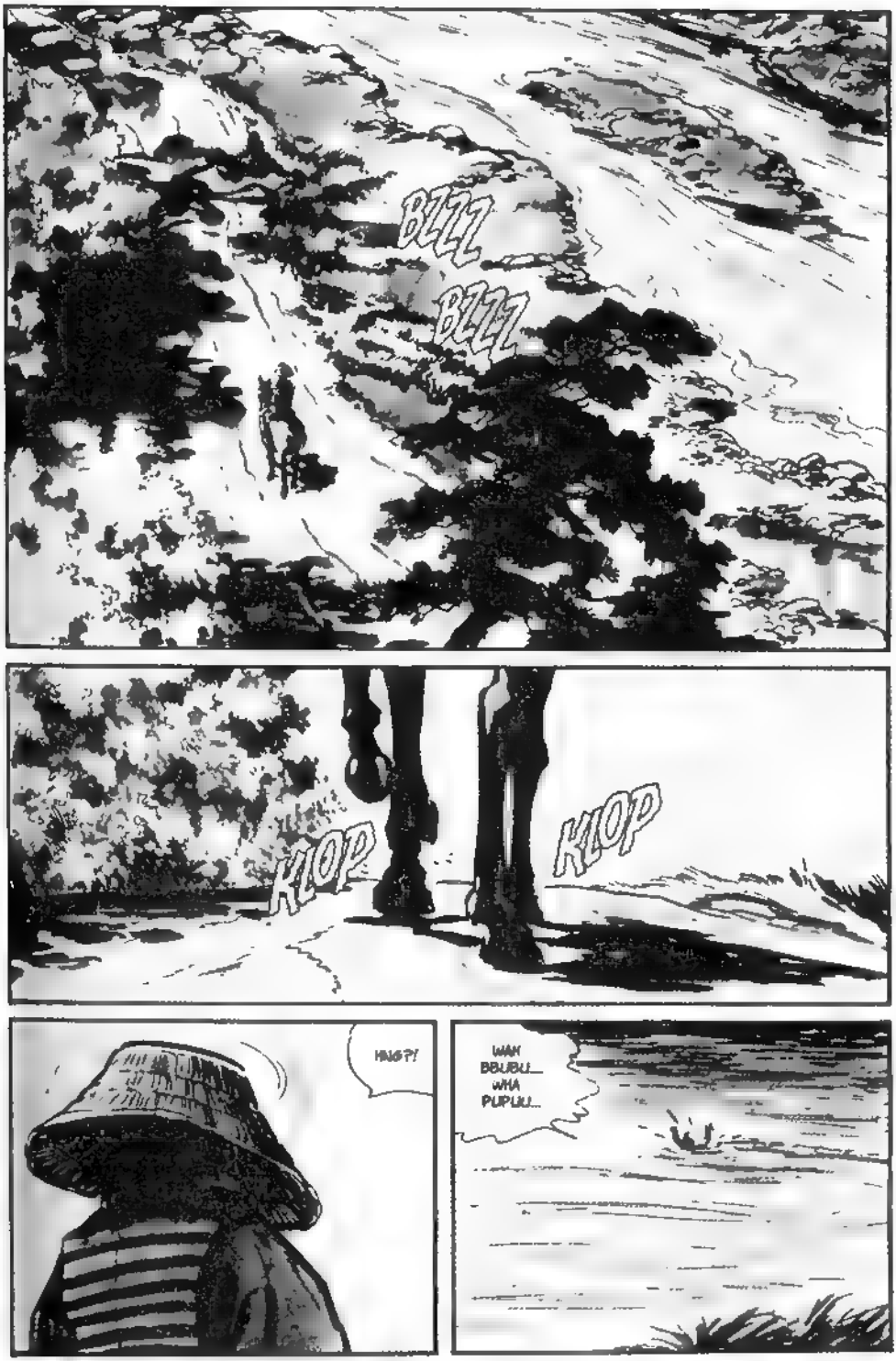
THDD
THDD
THDD
INTRUDER!
INVADER!
COME ONE, COME ALL! ARE YOU READY? I'LL BUILD A MOUNTAIN OF CORPSES!
DAIGORO! HOLD TIGHT!

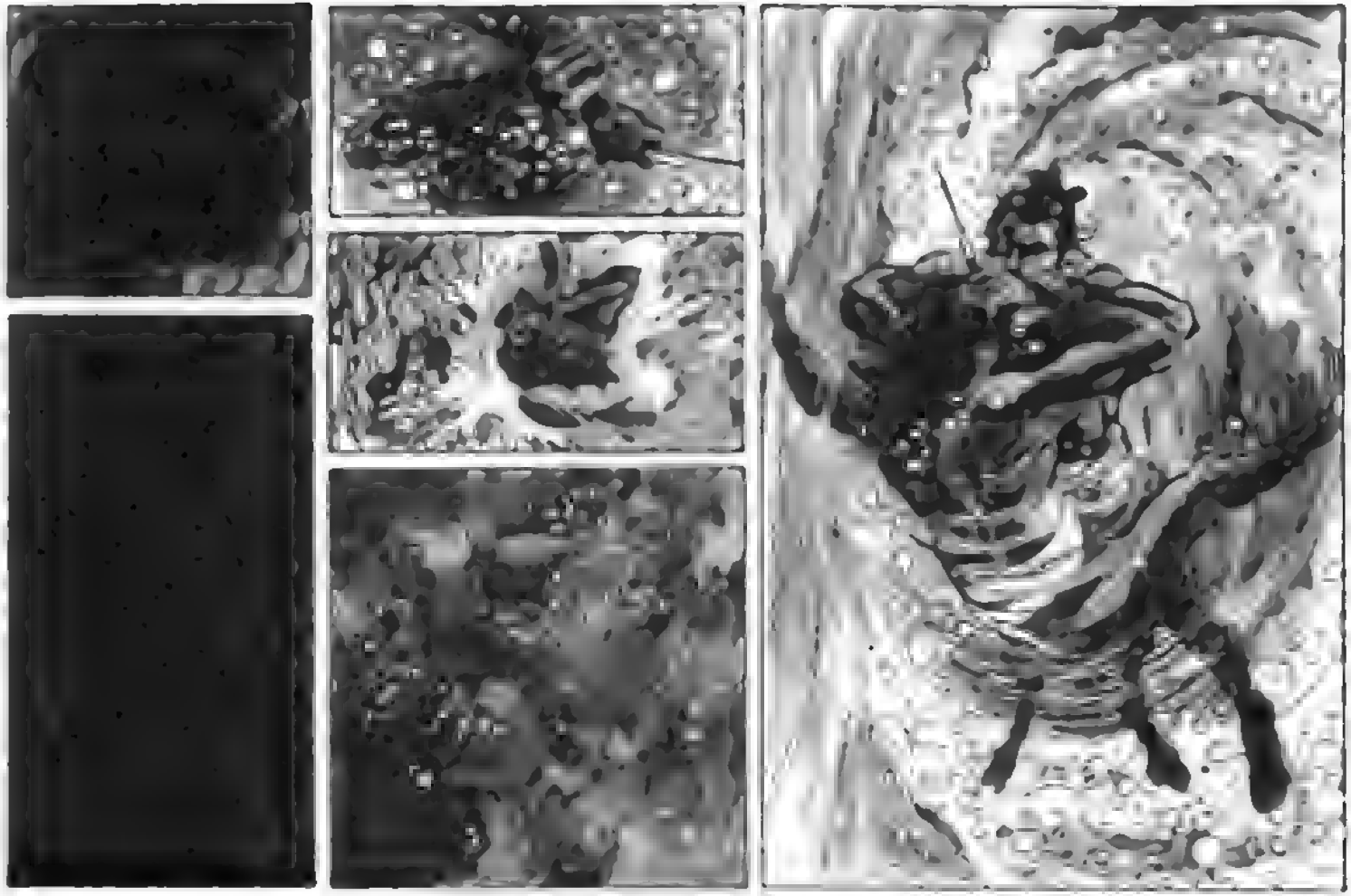
CEASE AND DESIST!
CEASE AND DESIST!
LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS! HIS LORDSHIP MOHOIDE TANOMO, GO-KARŌ!
WELL. HERE AT LAST
hphh.

HMM... THE *TRUE* MEANING OF *SHIMA*... NOW AT LAST, I UNDERSTAND... REVEAL YOUR SECRETS TO YOUR ENEMY, BECOME THEIR PRISONER TO ENTER INTO THEIR MIDST SHIMA, THAT HORRIFIC ZONE OF *DEATH*!
TO PLAN SO PERFECTLY...
IF WE LET THAT MAN GO, HE COULD EXPOSE ALL OUR CLAN FEUD
DID YOU OBSERVE THE END OF THE GUARDIAN EIGHT?
ARMS AGAINST AND HOPE TO PREVAIL
WOLF AND CUB, ASSASSIN

the second

A Father Knows His Child's Heart, as Only a Child Can Know His Father's


BZZZ
BZZZ
KLOP
KLOP
HUH?!
WAH BBUBU... WHA PUPUU...

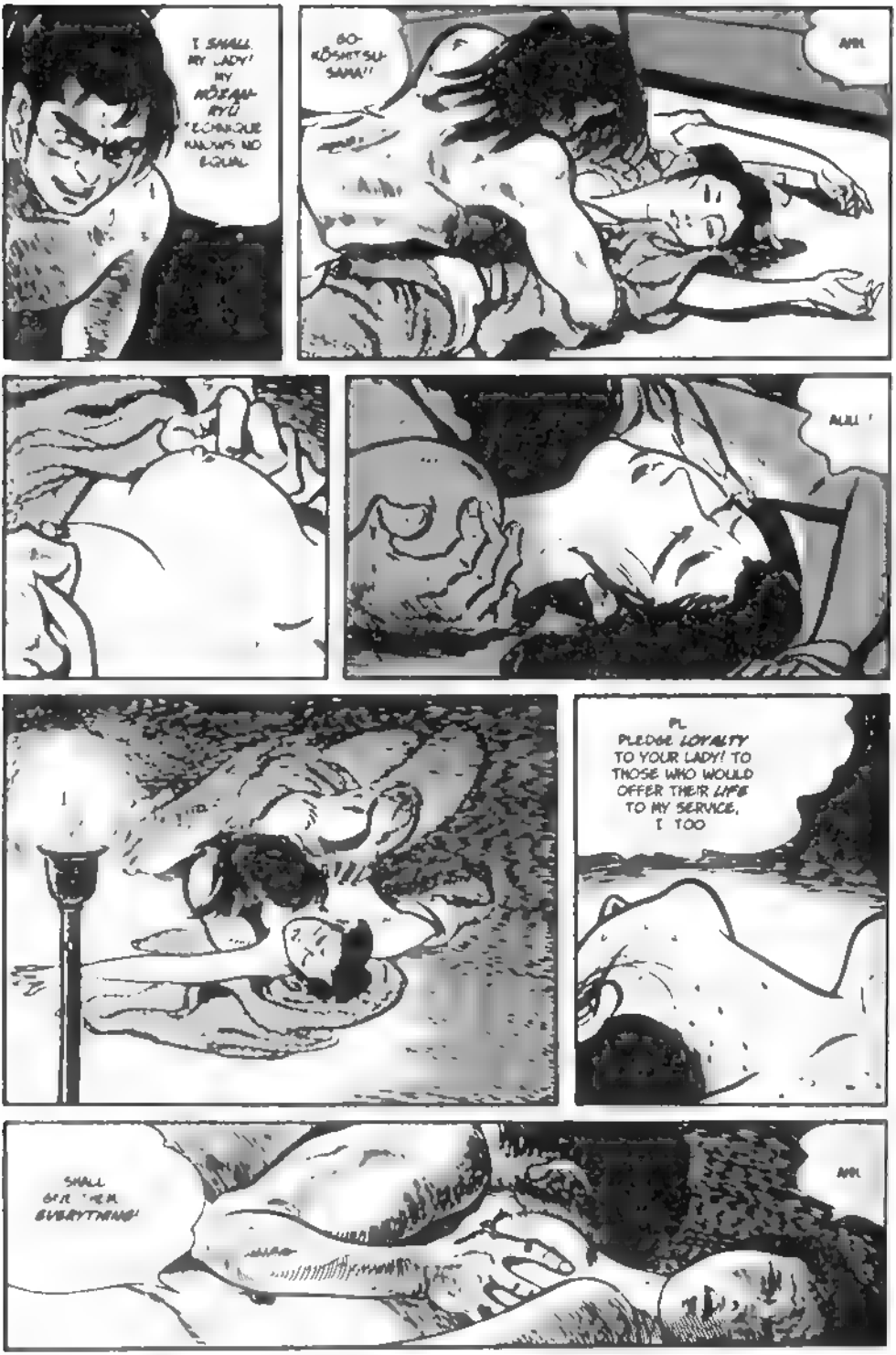


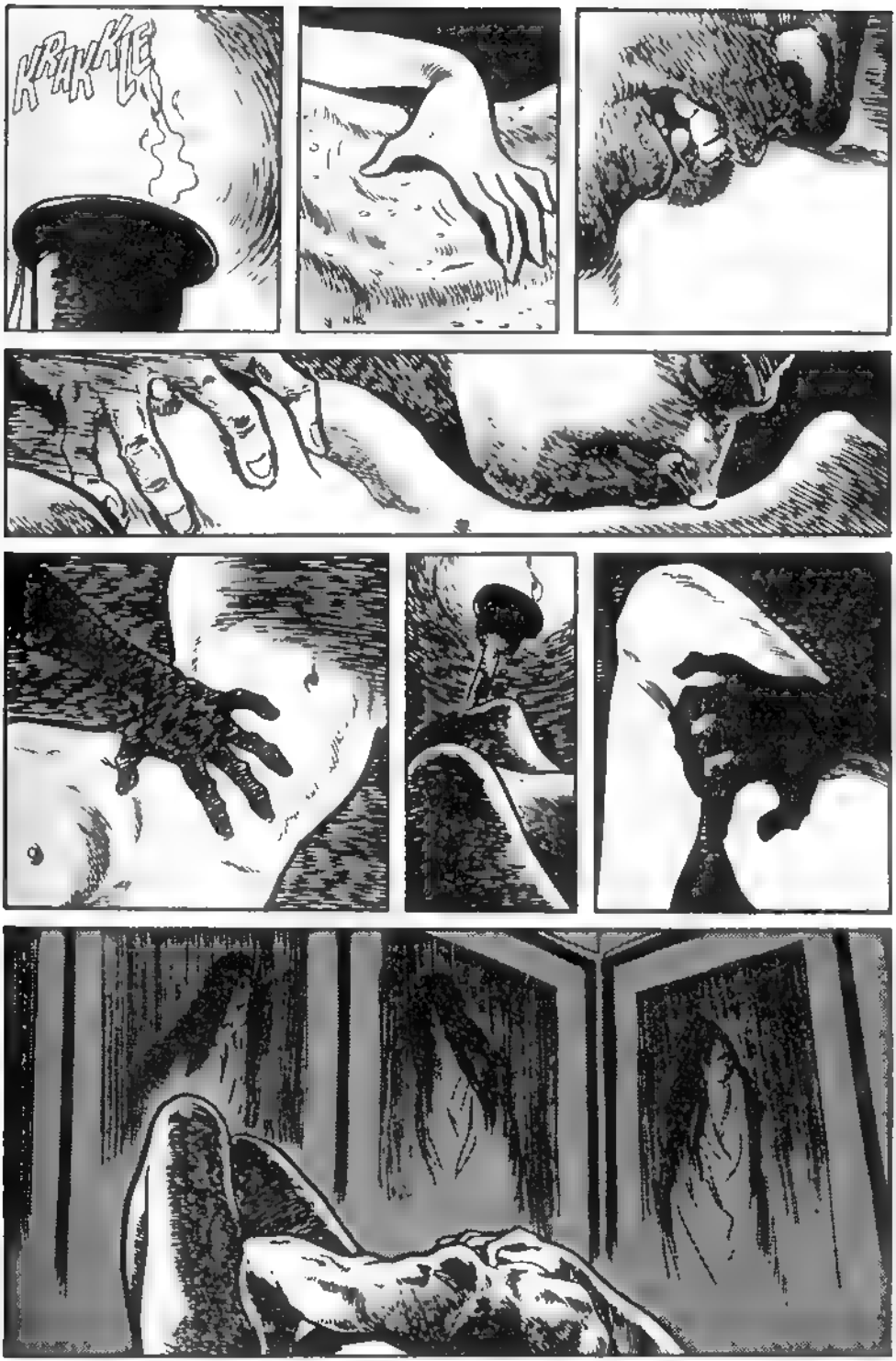
ZABA

CAVALRY PISTOLS, NOT EVEN WHEN HE SLEPT...
YET HE WAS FOUND NAKED, STABBED, CARRIED DOWNSTREAM ON THE NAGA RIVER...
MY PLANS, MA? THEY'VE HIRED A MASTER
LADY O-KIKU AND HER PEOPLE ARE DESPERATE, MY LADY THEY ARE HIRING FIGHTERS AS FAST AS THEY CAN.

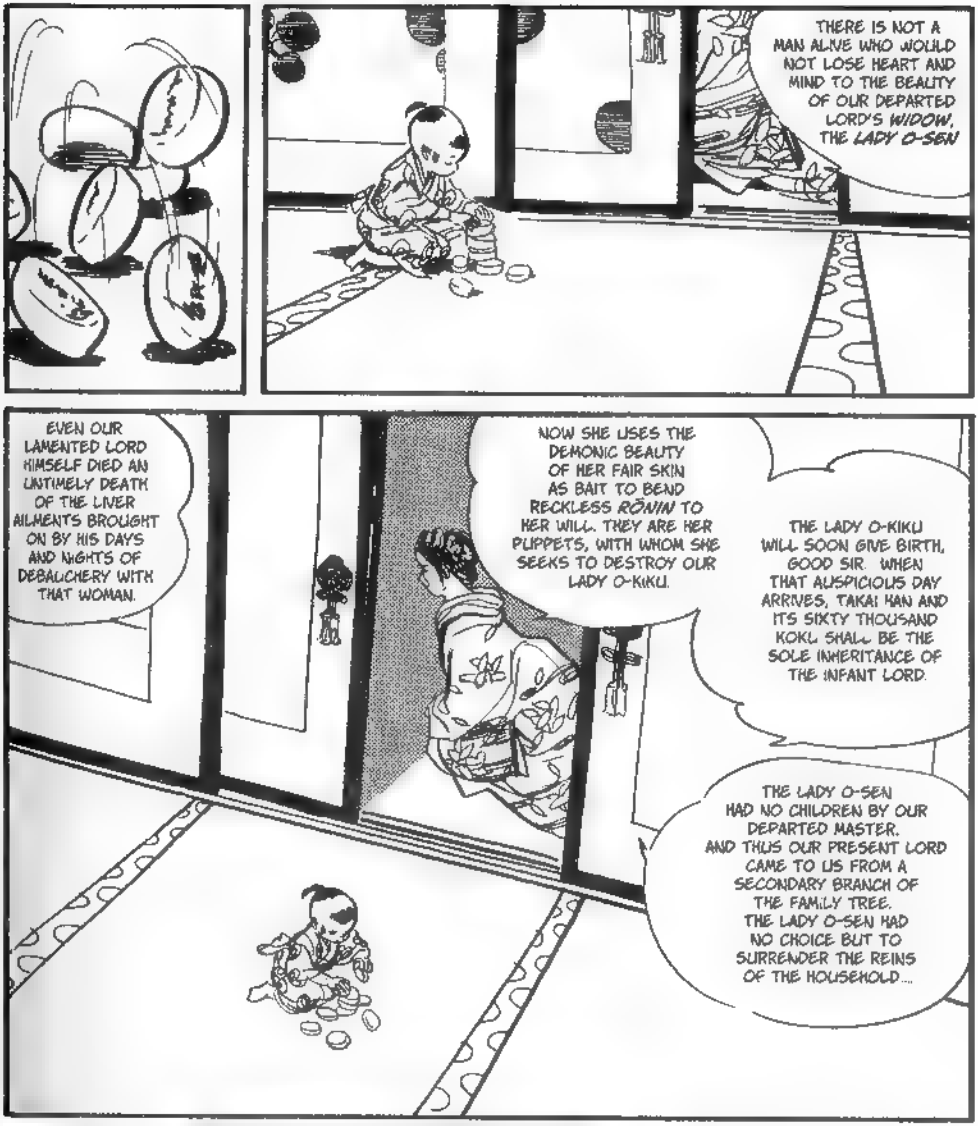
PURIZUE
ARE YOU
AFRAID?

SLP
YOU MAY ENTER
MY LADY I AM GRATEFUL.
IN JOY I COME TO YOU.
CLINK
UNDER-STAND, GEKI?
WITH YOUR FURIZUE FIGHTING STAFF YOU WILL SHATTER THAT WOMAN'S SKULL!


I SHALL, MY LADY! MY HŌZAN-RYŪ TECHNIQUE KNOWS NO EQUAL.
GO-KŌSHITSU-SAMA!!
AHH.
AUU!
PL
PLEDGE LOYALTY TO YOUR LADY! TO THOSE WHO WOULD OFFER THEIR LIFE TO MY SERVICE, I TOO
SHALL GIVE HER EVERYTHING!
AHH.


KRAKKLE

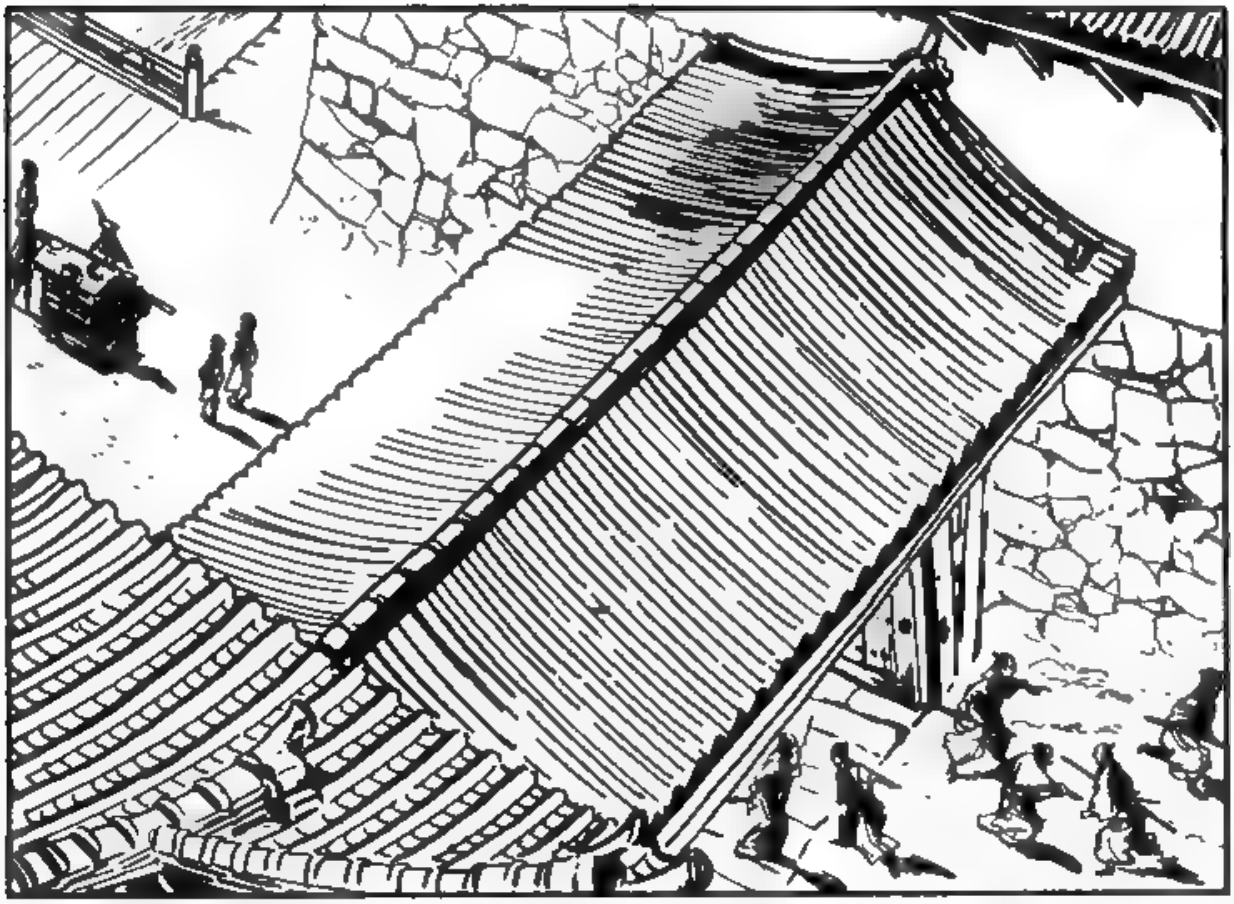
YAKA HAN SUKY
THOUSAND KOKU


THERE IS NOT A MAN ALIVE WHO WOULD NOT LOSE HEART AND MIND TO THE BEAUTY OF OUR DEPARTED LORD'S WIDOW, THE LADY O-SEN
EVEN OUR LAMENTED LORD HIMSELF DIED AN UNTIMELY DEATH OF THE LIVER AILMENTS BROUGHT ON BY HIS DAYS AND NIGHTS OF DEBAUCHERY WITH THAT WOMAN.
NOW SHE USES THE DEMONIC BEAUTY OF HER FAIR SKIN AS BAIT TO BEND RECKLESS RŌNIN TO HER WILL. THEY ARE HER PUPPETS, WITH WHOM SHE SEEKS TO DESTROY OUR LADY O-KIKU.
THE LADY O-KIKU WILL SOON GIVE BIRTH, GOOD SIR. WHEN THAT AUSPICIOUS DAY ARRIVES, TAKAI HAN AND ITS SIXTY THOUSAND KOKU SHALL BE THE SOLE INHERITANCE OF THE INFANT LORD.
THE LADY O-SEN HAD NO CHILDREN BY OUR DEPARTED MASTER. AND THUS OUR PRESENT LORD CAME TO US FROM A SECONDARY BRANCH OF THE FAMILY TREE. THE LADY O-SEN HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO SURRENDER THE REINS OF THE HOUSEHOLD...
NOW SHE SCHEMES TO CURRY THE FAVOR OF THE SHOGUNATE IN EDO, AND TO FIND A NEW HUSBAND FROM THE SHOGUN'S BLOODLINE. WITH THE POWER OF EDO BEHIND HER, SHE WOULD MAKE HER HUSBAND THE NEXT LORD OF TAKAI HAN.
THE TOKUGAWA CLAN HAS TOO MANY DESCENDANTS TO PLACE THEM ALL IN WORTHY POSTS WITHIN THE SHOGUNATE GOVERNMENT. IN THEIR GREED TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR OWN, THEY WILL SURELY AGREE TO THE LADY O-SEN'S PETITION, AND WILL SECRETLY ASSIST HER SCHEME TO RETURN TO POWER... AND THUS, GOOD SIR, YOUR STRENGTH IS ALL THAT WE CAN COUNT ON. WE HUMBLY BEG YOUR ASSISTANCE.

WHY NOT FELL THE TRUNK OF THE TREE WHEN IT THREATENS YOUR HOUSE? I CAN TRIM THE BRANCHES AS YOU WISH, BUT THEY SHALL ONLY GROW AGAIN.
THAT WOMAN, MONSTROUS THOUGH SHE BE, IS STILL THE WIDOW OF OUR DEPARTED LORD, INHERITOR OF THE TRUE BLOODLINE OF OUR CLAN...
THERE ARE STILL MANY AMONG OUR DEPARTED LORD'S RETAINERS WHO ARGUE FOR HER CAUSE.
BUT FEAR NOT, GOOD SIR. WHEN DAWN RISES UPON A NEW HEIR... THEN SHALL THE TIME BE RIPE.
AND THIS IS THE FINAL MONTH OF OUR LADY'S PREGNANCY.
A HUNDRED *RYŌ* FOR EVERY BRANCH! BUT FOR THE TRUNK, ONE *THOUSAND* RYŌ. IN ADVANCE...

KRIK KRIK
HEH HEH HEH... WITH SO FEW RETAINERS AT MY SIDE, NO ONE WILL DOUBT OUR INTENTIONS. CERTAINLY THEY'LL NEVER DREAM THAT *YOU* RIDE THE PALANQUIN WITH ME. HEH HEH HEH...
INDEED...
WAIT PATIENTLY ANOTHER *KOKU*. WHEN I HAVE LEFT THE MOTHER'S SIDE, *THEN* SHALL YOU STRIKE!
MY LADY!

AHHH!..
NNGHH!..
OWW..
AHH...
UNNNG!
MY LADY, BE STRONG! YOU *MUST* BE STRONG, MY LADY!
NNG!!
THIS IS BAD...! THE BABE'S STRENGTH IS WANING.. AT THIS RATE...
WH- *WHAT* DID YOU SAY?!
THERE ARE *COMPLI-CATIONS*, MY LADY..
AHH.. URNNG!



THE WIDOW O-SEN HAS ARRIVED TO PAY HER RESPECTS TO THE LADY O-KIKU.
WH... WHAT?!

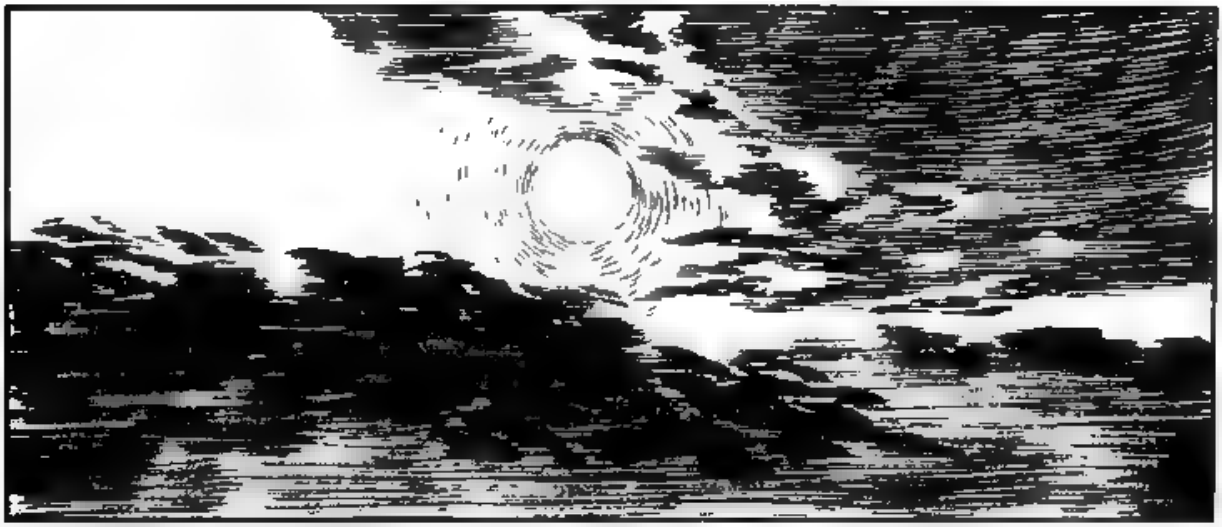
THAT - THAT WILL BE DIFFICULT...
FORGIVE US THIS IS NOT THE TIME...

ENOUGH! WHAT *INSOLENCE* IS THIS?!
MY - MY LADY!

IS *THIS* HOW YOU CELEBRATE A BLESSED EVENT?
MY LADY...

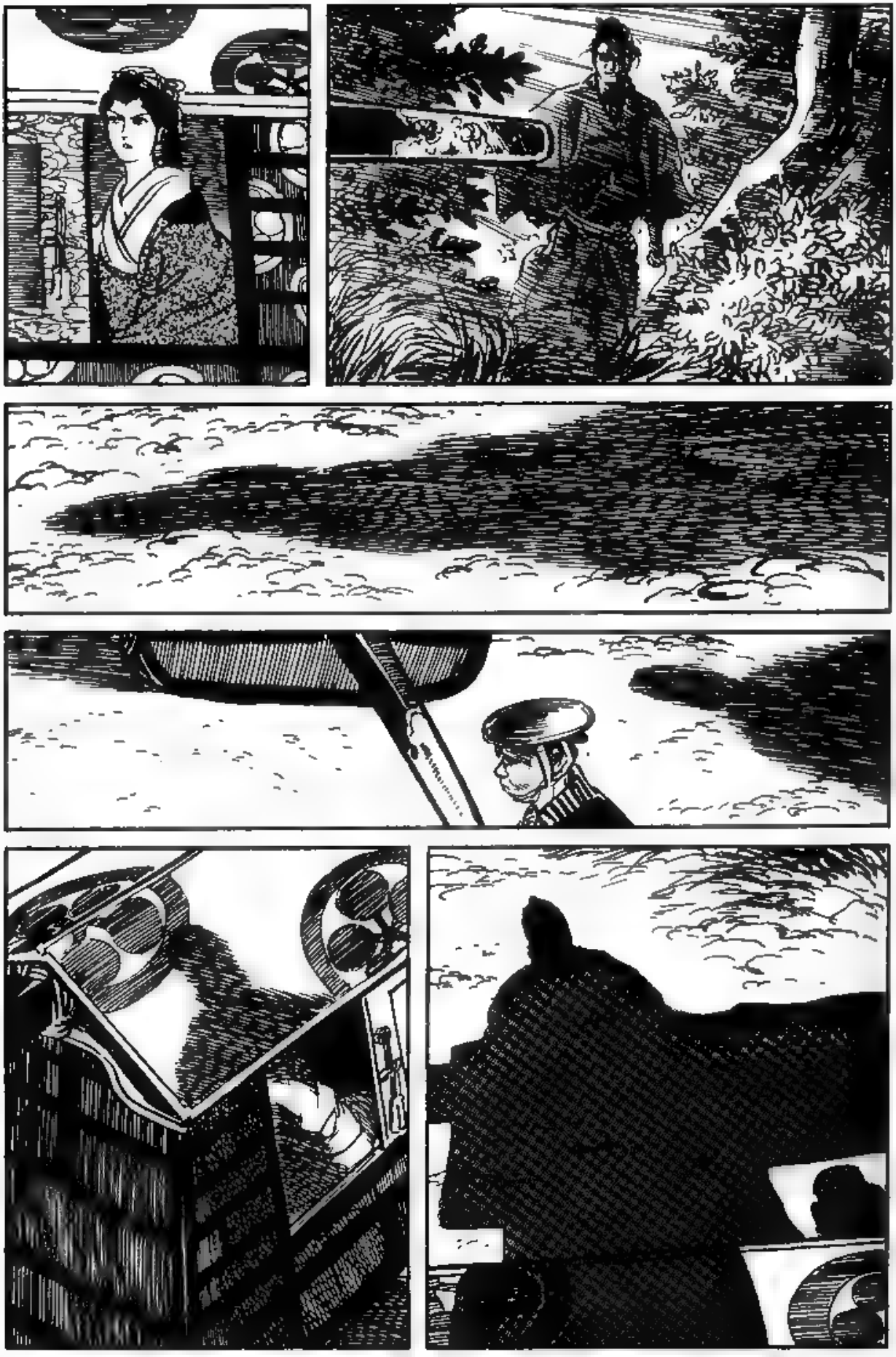
SPEAK, MAN!
IN TRUTH, MY LADY IT WAS A STILLBIRTH. AND OUR POOR LADY O-KIKU, SHE, TOO
WH- WHAT SAY YOU?!
MOTHER, AND CHILD, BOTH DEPARTED..?
TRAGEDY, MY LADY..
MY HEART IS SHATTERED.. SUCH SORROW.
I SHALL RETURN TO MY QUARTERS, AND PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF THIS TRAGIC MOTHER AND CHILD..
HOH HOH HOH HOH!
HOH HOH HOH HOH!

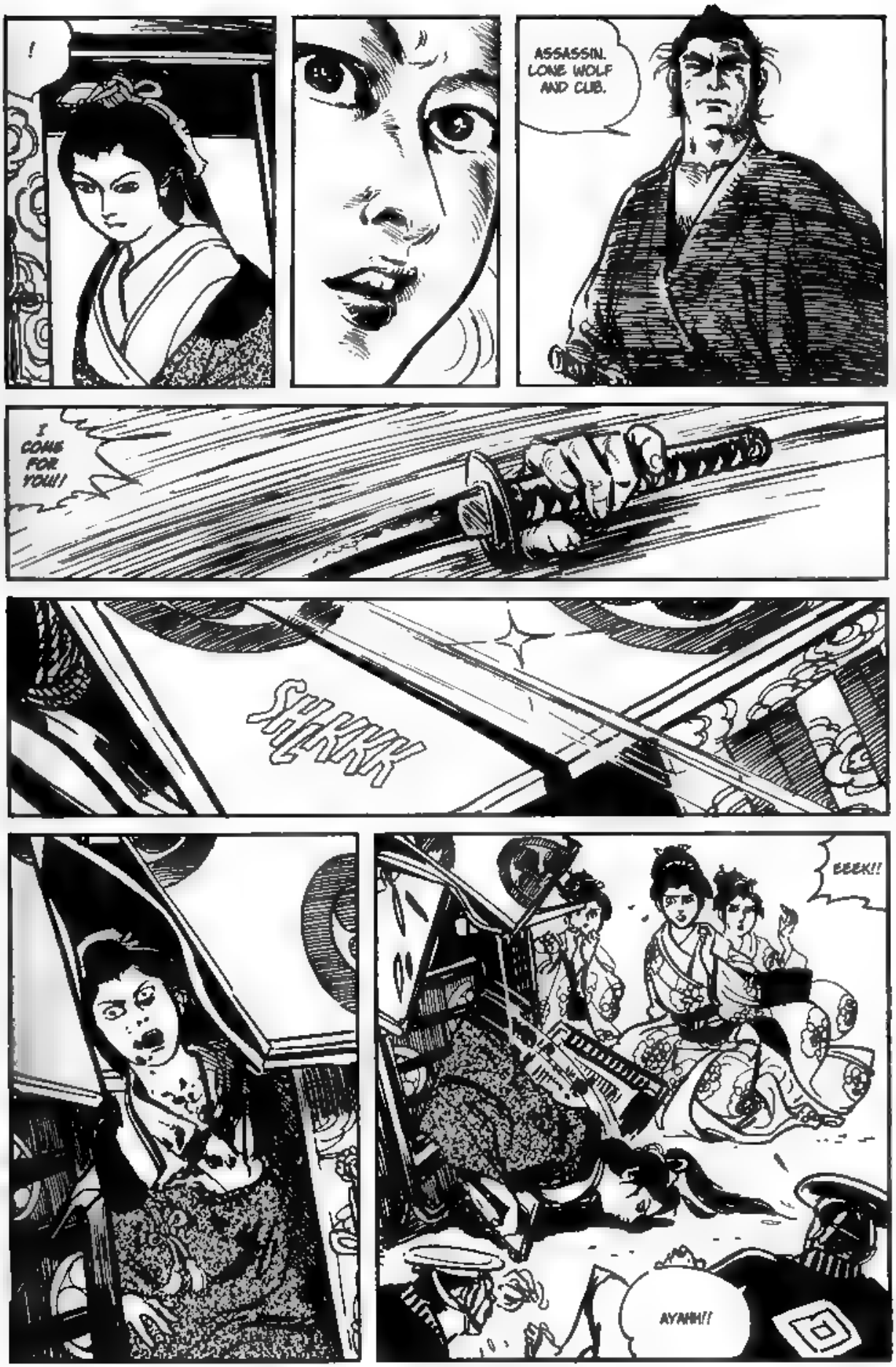
MMMRRR
ARE THERE NO GODS? IS THERE NO BUDDHA...
YOUNG LORD... NONE BUT YOU SHALL HAVE IT! NONE BUT YOU SHALL INHERIT TAKAI HANJI'S SIXTY THOUSAND KOKU, DARLING CHILD!
THOUGH YOU COME INTO THIS WORLD STILLBORN, IT IS YOURS, MY LORD! YOU ARE STILL MY LORD!
THAT RŌNIN SHALL SEE TO IT, MY LORD! THAT RŌNIN AND HIS LITTLE BOY!



HEH HEH...
HEH HEH
HEH...

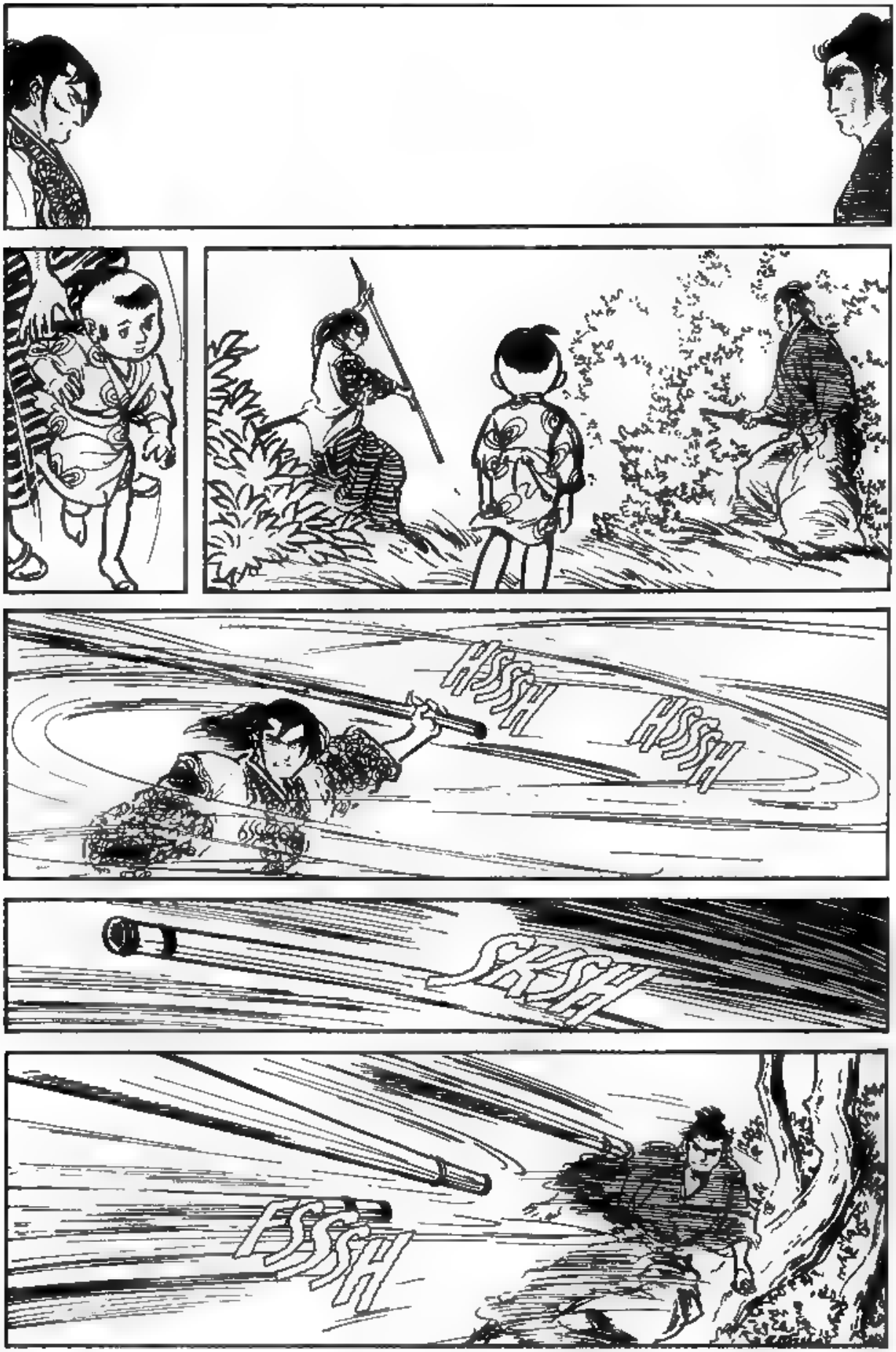
RATHER TAKES THE WIND OUT OF OUR SAILS, MY LADY
HAH HAH HAH. FATE CANNOT BE CHEATED, GEKI. HAD THE BABE BEEN BORN ALIVE, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN THE HAND OF DEATH. HEH HEH HEH.
NOW I JUST HAVE TO FIND THE MAN THAT KILLED BAJŌZUTSU ... AND SQUEEZE OUT HIS DYING BREATH.
?!
BANG!
POW! POW!
DAMN! THAT'S BAJŌZUTSU'S MATCHLOCK!
BANG! BANG!

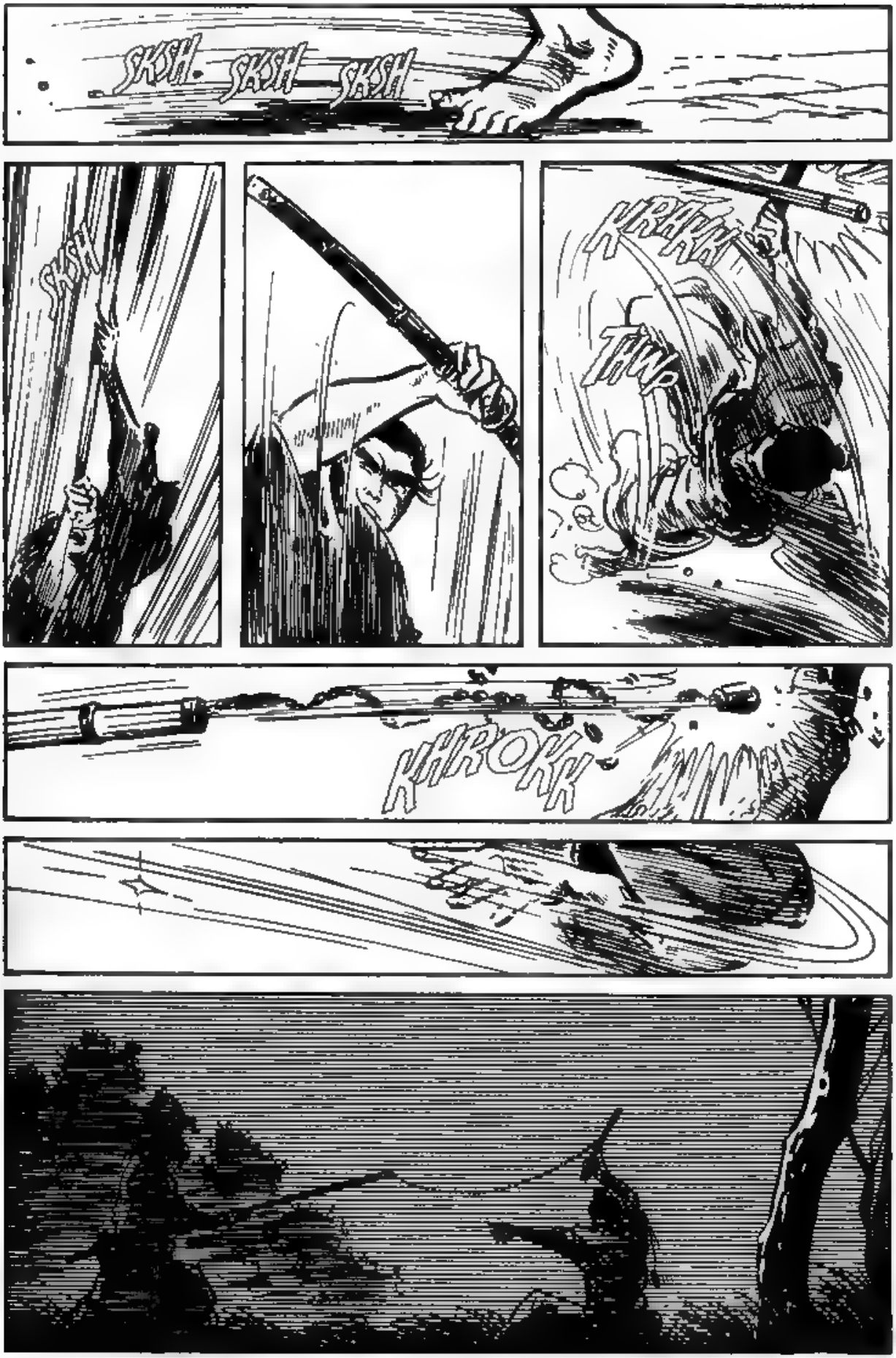



!
ASSASSIN. LONE WOLF AND CUB.
I COME FOR YOU!!
SHKKK
EEEK!!
AYAHH!!

SHKK
AHHG! WAHH!
HIL
BANG! BANG!
LITTLE BOY!
HEY! LITTLE BOY! WHERE DID YOU FIND THAT?!
POW! POW!
HOW DO YOU KNOW IT MAKES THAT SOUND!
WHO DID YOU GET IT FROM?
EH?!
POW! POW!
RNG!!
EEEK! WAAAH!

YOU BASTARD! YOU USED AN INNOCENT CHILD TO LURE ME FROM THE PALANQUIN?!
IS THAT HOW YOU KILLED BAJÔZUTSU?!
MY WORK IS DONE. YOU'VE LOST YOUR EMPLOYER. THERE'S NO REASON FOR US TO FIGHT
WHO ARE YOU, DAMN IT!!
. . . .
YOU'D PUT A CHILD AT RISK TO ACHIEVE YOUR ENDS?! AND YOU CALL YOURSELF A SAMURAI?!
A FATHER KNOWS HIS CHILD'S HEART, AS ONLY A CHILD CAN KNOW HIS FATHER'S.
NO STRANGER COULD UNDERSTAND.
WHAT?!
THEN, IF I KILL YOUR BOY, WHAT WILL YOU DO?
WHY NOT TRY IT AND SEE?

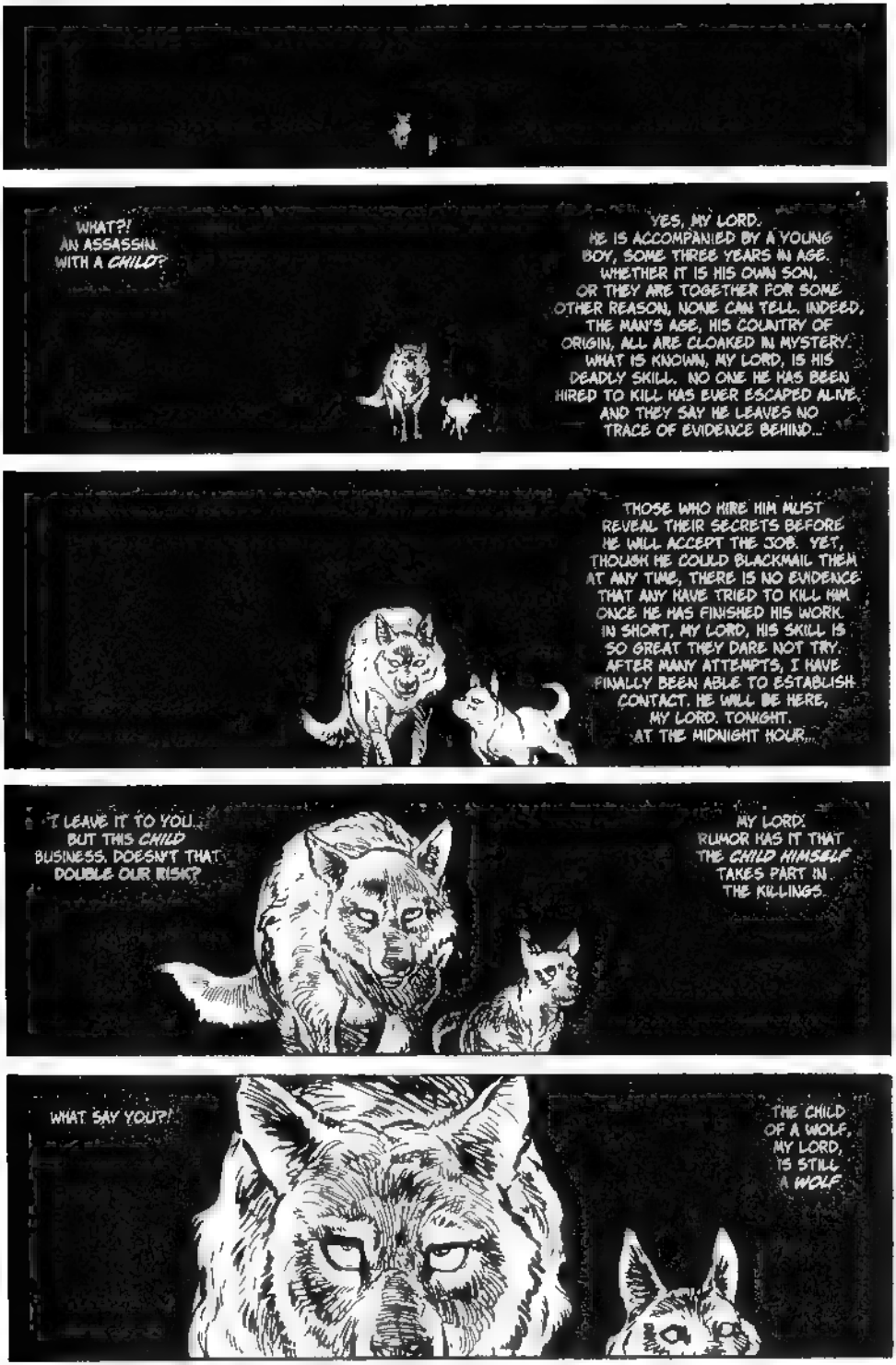

HSSH
HSSH
SKSH
ESSH


SKSH SKSH SKSH
SKSH
KRAKK
TWP
KHROKK

KRRRAK
SPRAK
D - DAMN YOU...NOW DID YOU KNOW.. MY KŌZAN-RYŪ *FURIZUE*...
YOU COULD SEE MY SKILL WITH THE SWORD. AND YET YOU RELEASED THIS CHILD.
IT WAS THE CONFIDENCE OF ONE WHO TRUSTS WEAPONS OVER SKILL. WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE BUT A FURIZUE?
M... MONSTER... TO THE VERY END, YOU USE YOUR OWN CHILD.. RISK HIS LIFE...
DID NOT I SAY? A FATHER KNOWS HIS CHILD'S HEART, AS ONLY A CHILD CAN KNOW HIS FATHER'S FATHER AND CHILD WALK THROUGH LIFE, HAND IN HAND!
THIS IS *SHIKAN*, THE BOND OF LIFE. WHEN FATHER AND SON RELY ON THEIR BOND TO DO WHAT THEY MUST TO SURVIVE...
DAIGORO! THIS IS HOW IT MUST BE.
YOU AND I, *INSEPARABLE*.
SUCH IS OUR DESTINY.

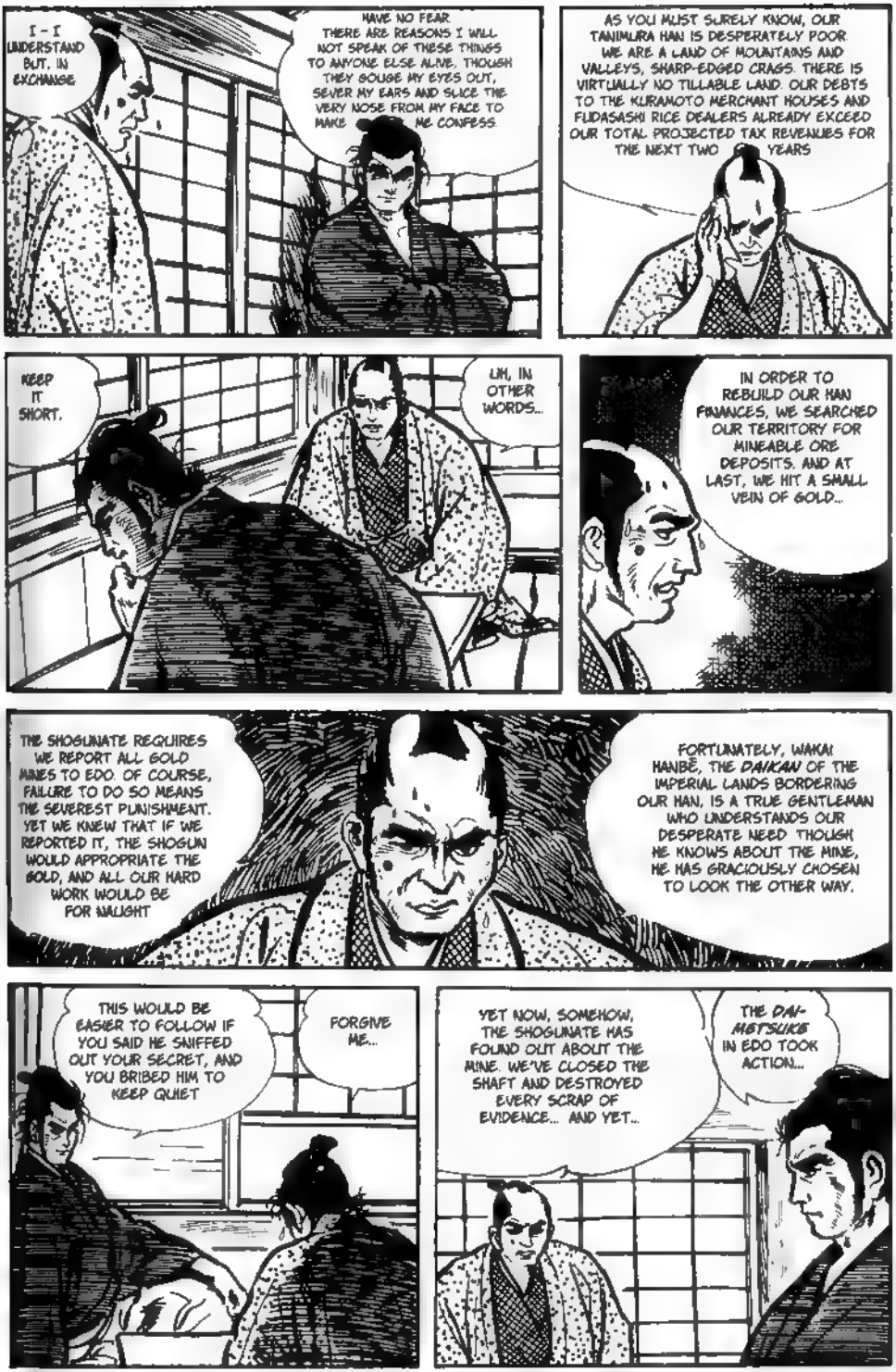
the third

From North to South, From West to East

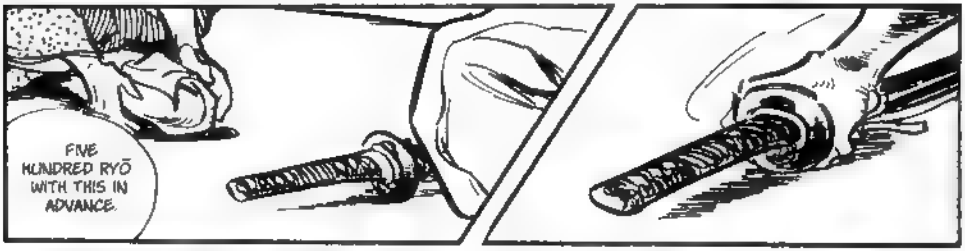

WHAT?! AN ASSASSIN. WITH A *CHILD*?
YES, MY LORD. HE IS ACCOMPANIED BY A YOUNG BOY, SOME THREE YEARS IN AGE. WHETHER IT IS HIS OWN SON, OR THEY ARE TOGETHER FOR SOME OTHER REASON, NONE CAN TELL. INDEED, THE MAN'S AGE, HIS COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, ALL ARE CLOAKED IN MYSTERY. WHAT IS KNOWN, MY LORD, IS HIS DEADLY SKILL. NO ONE HE HAS BEEN HIRED TO KILL HAS EVER ESCAPED ALIVE. AND THEY SAY HE LEAVES NO TRACE OF EVIDENCE BEHIND...
THOSE WHO HIRE HIM MUST REVEAL THEIR SECRETS BEFORE HE WILL ACCEPT THE JOB. YET, THOUGH HE COULD BLACKMAIL THEM AT ANY TIME, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT ANY HAVE TRIED TO KILL HIM ONCE HE HAS FINISHED HIS WORK. IN SHORT, MY LORD, HIS SKILL IS SO GREAT THEY DARE NOT TRY. AFTER MANY ATTEMPTS, I HAVE FINALLY BEEN ABLE TO ESTABLISH CONTACT. HE WILL BE HERE, MY LORD. TONIGHT. AT THE MIDNIGHT HOUR...
"I LEAVE IT TO YOU... BUT THIS *CHILD* BUSINESS. DOESN'T THAT DOUBLE OUR RISK?
MY LORD. RUMOR HAS IT THAT THE *CHILD HIMSELF* TAKES PART IN THE KILLINGS.
WHAT SAY YOU?!
THE CHILD OF A WOLF, MY LORD, IS STILL A *WOLF*.

SO BE IT!
I PLACE THE FATE
OF TANMURA HAN
AND ITS THIRTY-FIVE
THOUSAND KOKU IN
THIS MAN'S HANDS! SUCH
AN *INVINCIBLE* NAME!
I *LIKE* IT!
KRIK
KRIK

THE MIDNIGHT KOKU.
THE THIRD HOUR...
I AM KATO NAIZEN, METSUKE OF TANIMURA HAN.
YOU REFUSE TO CONSIDER OUR REQUEST UNLESS I TELL YOU EVERYTHING?!
I DON'T WANT ANY UNPLEASANTNESS WHEN MY WORK IS DONE...


I - I UNDERSTAND BUT, IN EXCHANGE
HAVE NO FEAR. THERE ARE REASONS I WILL NOT SPEAK OF THESE THINGS TO ANYONE ELSE ALIVE, THOUGH THEY GOUGE MY EYES OUT, SEVER MY EARS AND SLICE THE VERY NOSE FROM MY FACE TO MAKE ME CONFESS.
AS YOU MUST SURELY KNOW, OUR TANIMURA HAN IS DESPERATELY POOR. WE ARE A LAND OF MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS, SHARP-EDGED CRAGS. THERE IS VIRTUALLY NO TILLABLE LAND. OUR DEBTS TO THE KURAMOTO MERCHANT HOUSES AND FUDASASHI RICE DEALERS ALREADY EXCEED OUR TOTAL PROJECTED TAX REVENUES FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS
KEEP IT SHORT.
UH, IN OTHER WORDS...
IN ORDER TO REBUILD OUR HAN FINANCES, WE SEARCHED OUR TERRITORY FOR MINEABLE ORE DEPOSITS. AND AT LAST, WE HIT A SMALL VEIN OF GOLD...
THE SHOGUNATE REQUIRES WE REPORT ALL GOLD MINES TO EDO. OF COURSE, FAILURE TO DO SO MEANS THE SEVEREST PUNISHMENT. YET WE KNEW THAT IF WE REPORTED IT, THE SHOGUN WOULD APPROPRIATE THE GOLD, AND ALL OUR HARD WORK WOULD BE FOR NAUGHT
FORTUNATELY, WAKAI HANBE, THE *DAIKAN* OF THE IMPERIAL LANDS BORDERING OUR HAN, IS A TRUE GENTLEMAN WHO UNDERSTANDS OUR DESPERATE NEED. THOUGH HE KNOWS ABOUT THE MINE, HE HAS GRACIOUSLY CHOSEN TO LOOK THE OTHER WAY.
THIS WOULD BE EASIER TO FOLLOW IF YOU SAID HE SNIFFED OUT YOUR SECRET, AND YOU BRIBED HIM TO KEEP QUIET
FORGIVE ME...
YET NOW, SOMEHOW, THE SHOGUNATE HAS FOUND OUT ABOUT THE MINE. WE'VE CLOSED THE SHAFT AND DESTROYED EVERY SCRAP OF EVIDENCE... AND YET...
THE *DAI-METSUKE* IN EDO TOOK ACTION...

THE SHOGUNATE HAS MARKED WAKAI FOR INVESTIGATION. THEY INTEND TO STRIP HIM OF HIS POST, DRAG HIM TO EDO, AND INTERROGATE HIM WITHOUT MERCY. THEN THEY WILL USE HIS CONFESSION TO JUSTIFY THE DISSOLUTION OF TANIMURA HAN ITSELF...
IF THEY CAN DELIVER WAKAI SAFELY TO EDO, IT WILL BE THE END FOR OUR HAN. THE CHOICE IS UNPALATABLE, BUT CLEAR. WE MUST SILENCE WAKAI FOR THE SAFETY OF THE HAN.
I BEG YOU. USE YOUR SKILLS TO SILENCE WAKAI FOREVER...

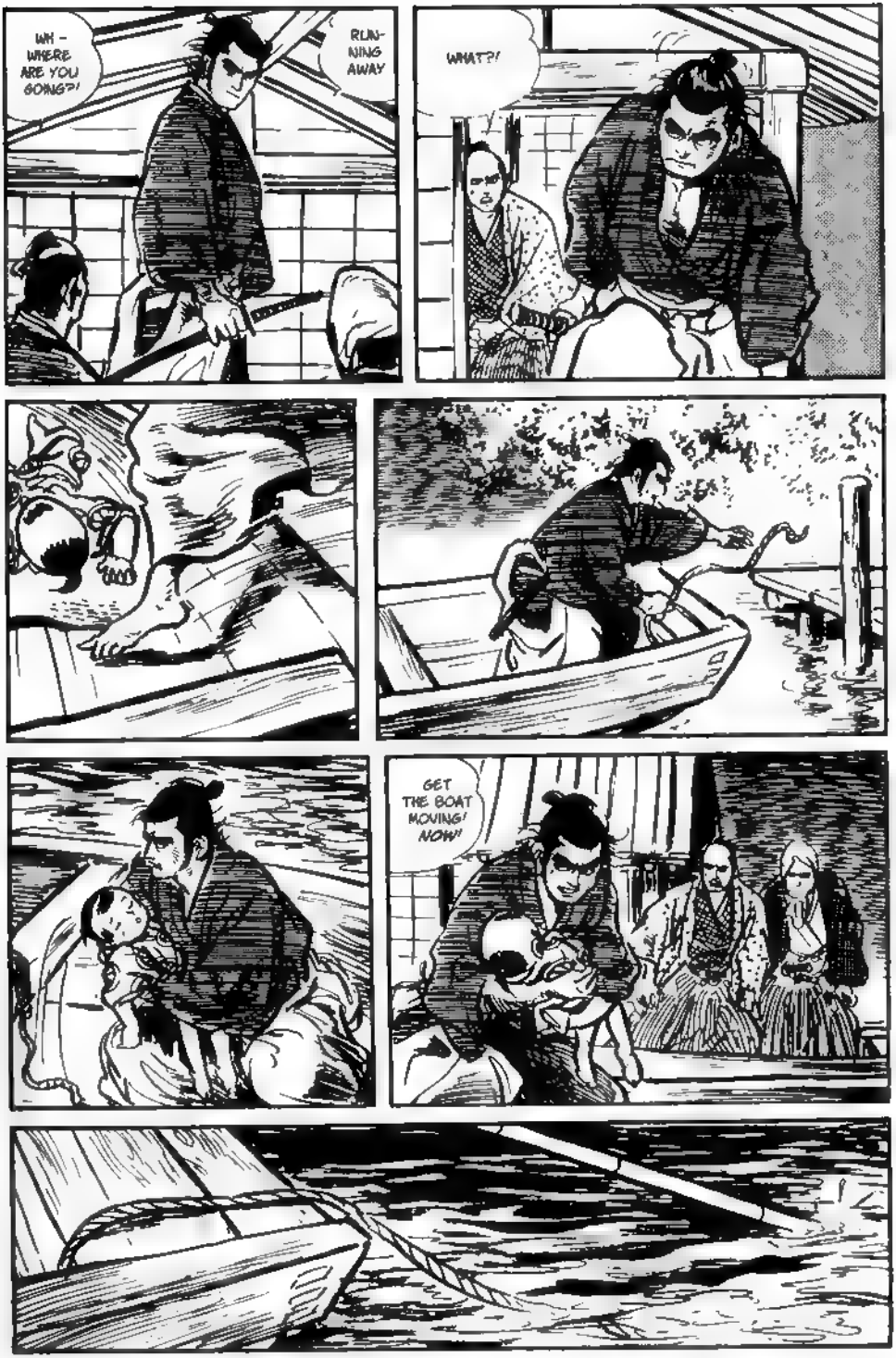

FIVE HUNDRED RYŌ WITH THIS IN ADVANCE.

WP

W - WHAT ON EARTH...

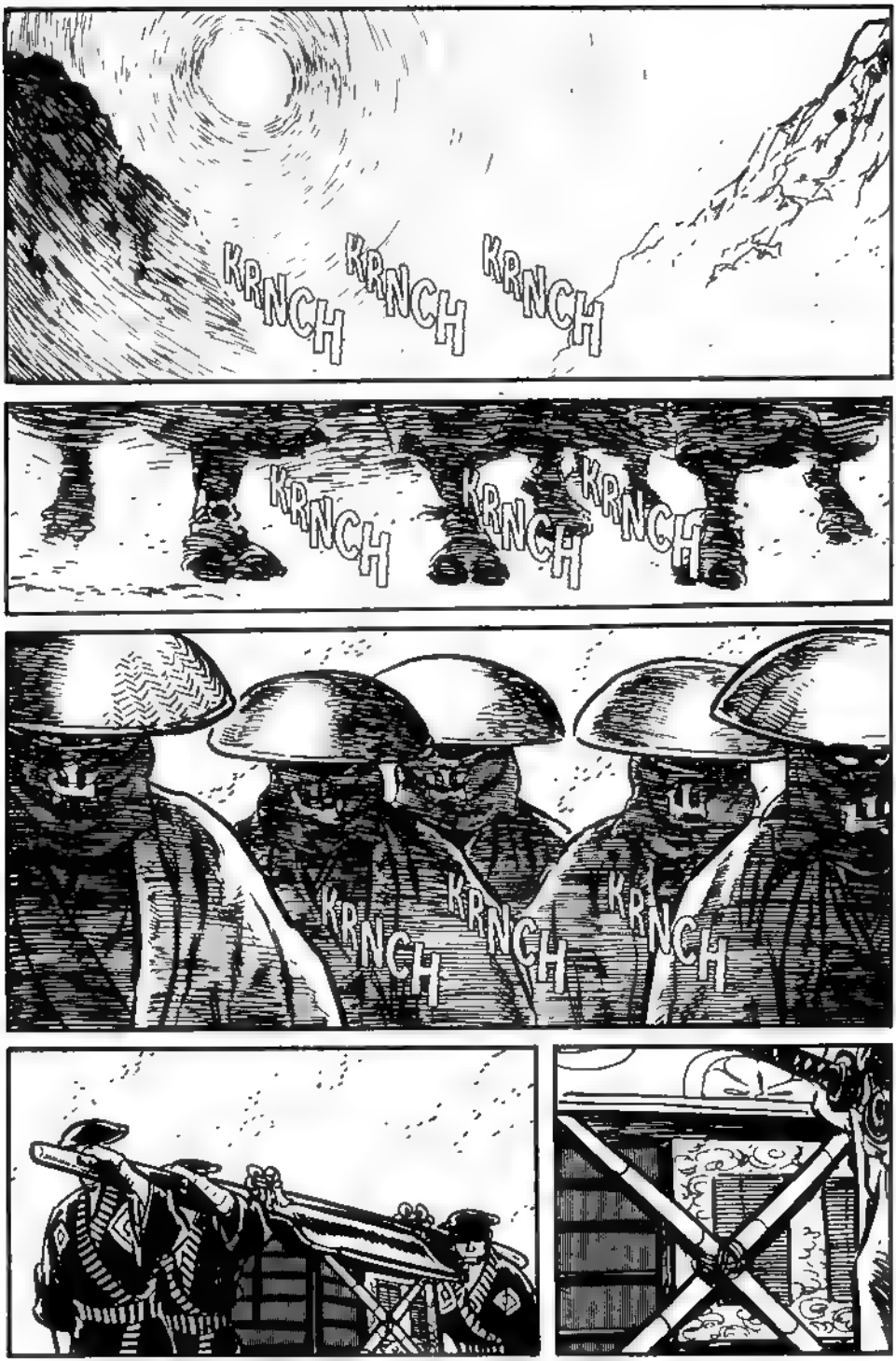
THOSE FOOT-STEPS...
!?
HE'S BADLY WOUNDED
!?
GOOD GOD! INOUE!
RWAG. NGAI..
I - INOUE!!
INOUE! HOLD ON!
PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!

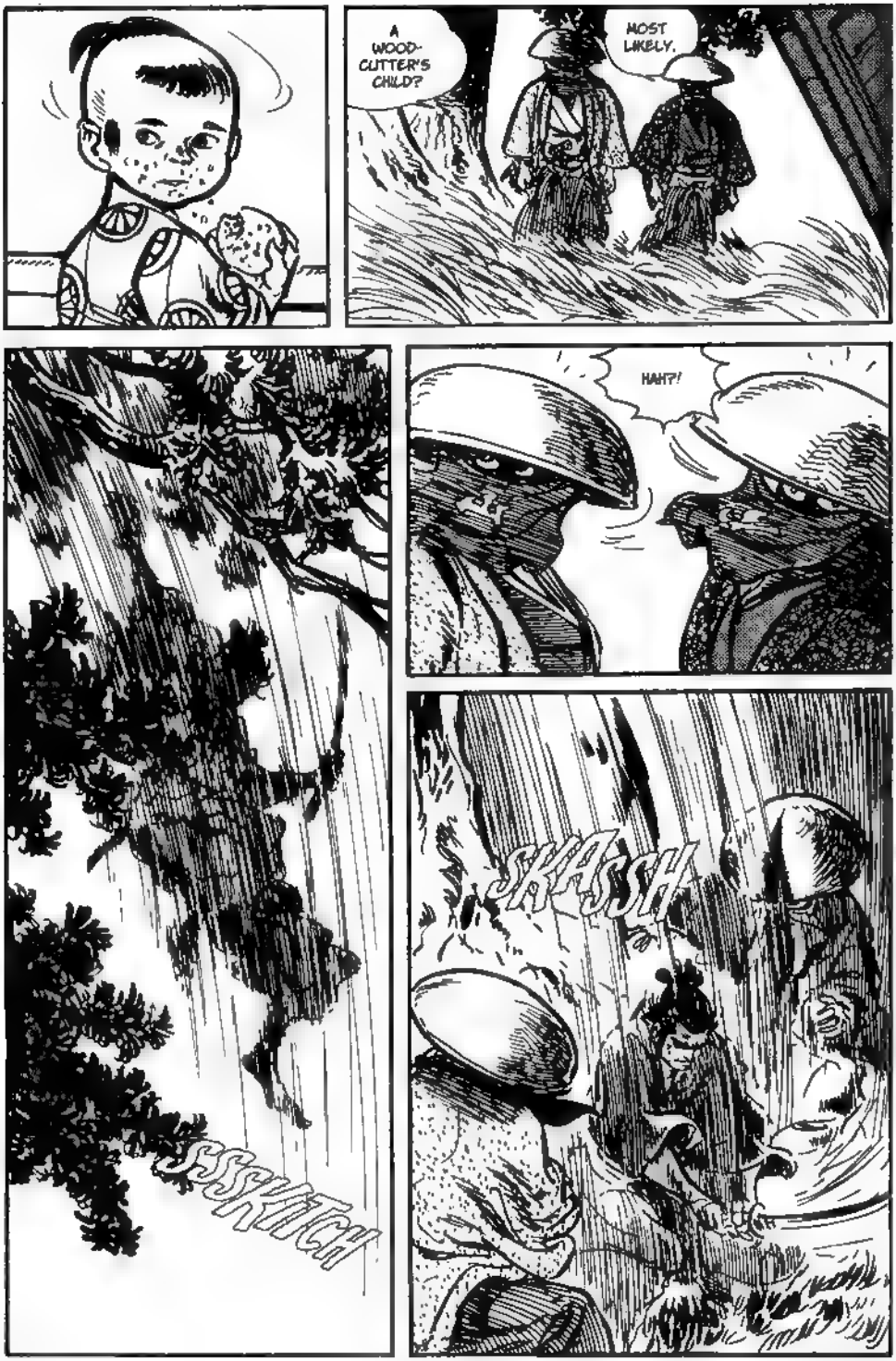
DAIKAN WAKAI HAS BEEN TAKEN AWAY IN A GUARDED PALANQUIN.
NO! DO YOU KNOW THE ROUTE?
U - VIA SHIMO-SUWA TO THE KŌSHŪ BYWAY TO... TO EDO
STAY WITH US, MAN! HOW MANY GUARDS! HOW MANY?!
WAGAN. F- FIVE.
WHAT?! JUST FIVE?! IS THAT TRUE?
THEN, THEN...
WHAT HAPPENED TO TONAMI AND THE OTHERS WHO WERE WITH YOU?!
WE WERE AMBUSHED MYSTERIOUS ASSAILANTS. ALL ALL SLAUGHTERED...
MYS- TERIOUS ASSAIL- ANTS?! HOW SO?! INOUE!
RRNNG.. U- VEILED... WEARING HATS, DEEP KONOGASA HATS...
URGGG
INOUE! SPEAK TO ME! INOUE!


WH - WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!
RUN- NING AWAY
WHAT?!
GET THE BOAT MOVING! NOW!

INSIDE!
FWP
KRIK
KRIK

AS I THOUGHT THEY DELIBERATELY SLASHED HIM SO HE WOULDN'T DIE INSTANTLY THEY WANTED HIM TO LEAD THEM BACK TO YOU..
WH- WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?!
THE SHOGUNATE'S YAMA-METSUKE
YAMA-METSUKE?!
SECRET METSUKE ENCHARGED WITH MONITORING THE MOUNTAIN REGIONS UNDER THE SHOGUNATE'S DIRECT CONTROL!
THEY'RE TOUGH AND HARDENED FIGHTERS..
KUCHIKI JŌNAI LEADS THEM, A MASTER OF THE ICHIDEN-RYŪ HIS STANDING QUICK DRAW IS FAMOUS THROUGHOUT THE LAND
. . .
YOUR MAN SAID THERE WERE FIVE GUARDS, BUT THAT WOULD BE THE ONES WITH THE PALANQUIN ITSELF THERE MUST BE A SCORE OR MORE SHADOWING IT FROM THE WOODS AND HILLS. THERE'S NO WAY YOU CAN MOUNT A SUCCESSFUL ATTACK.. EVEN RIFLES WILL BE USELESS. IT'S CHILD'S PLAY FOR A MOUNTAIN SHINOBI TO SNIFF OUT A BURNING MATCHLOCK FUSE.
THEN, THEN YOU'RE SAYING YOU WON'T DO IT?!
I'M SAYING I WILL..

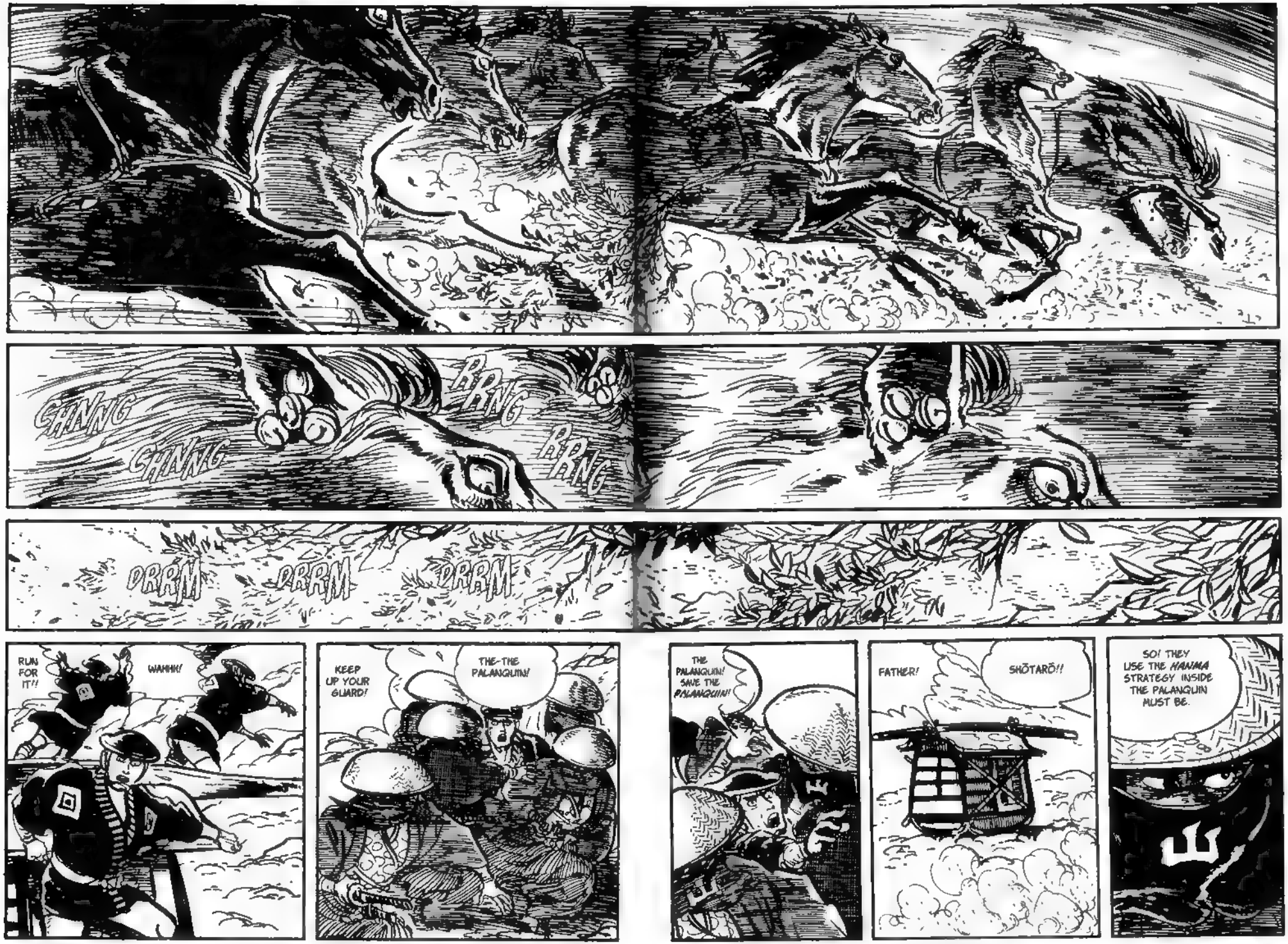

KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH
KRNCH

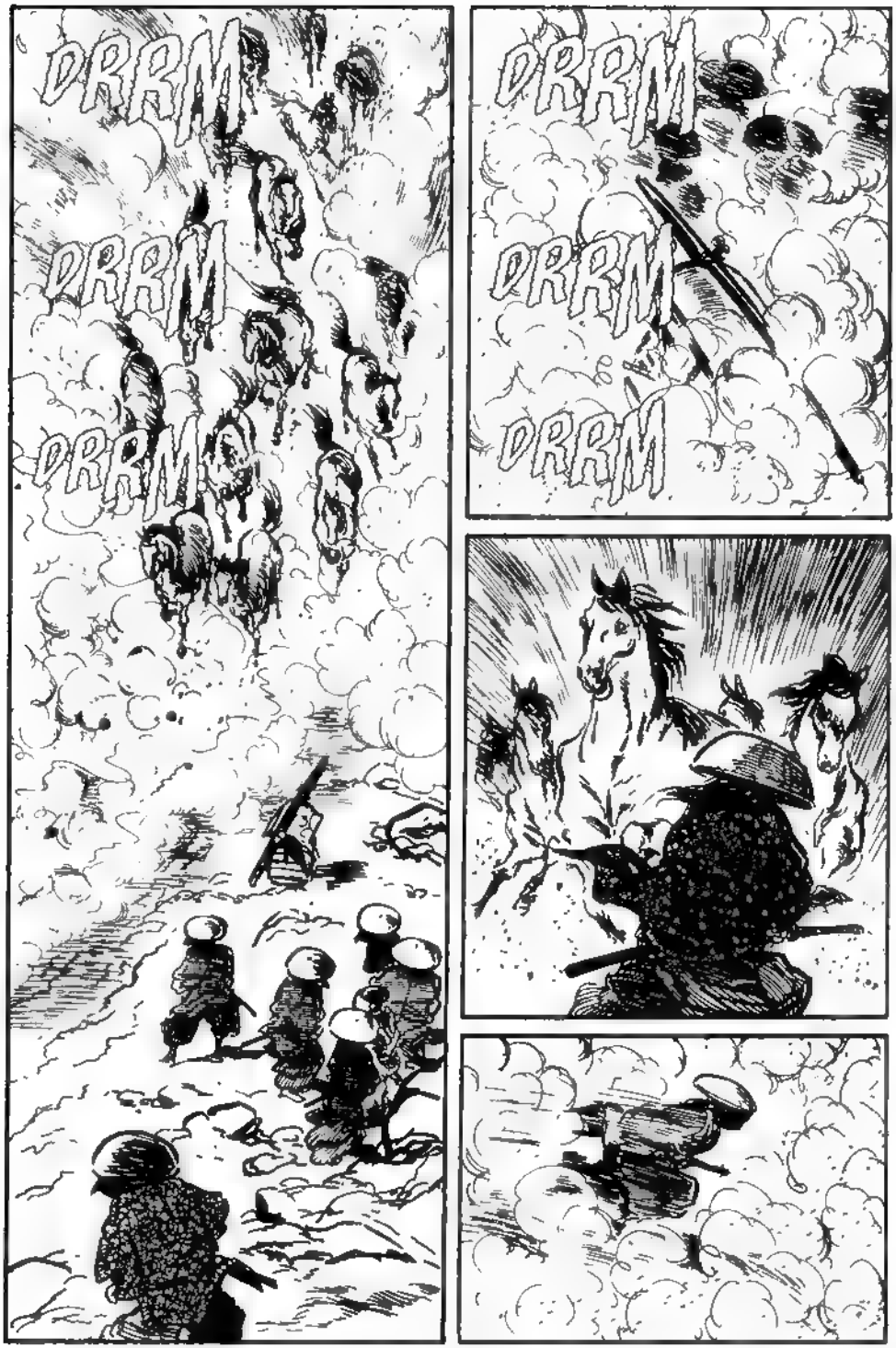

A WOOD-CUTTER'S CHILD?
MOST LIKELY.
HAH?!
SSSKITCH
SKASSH

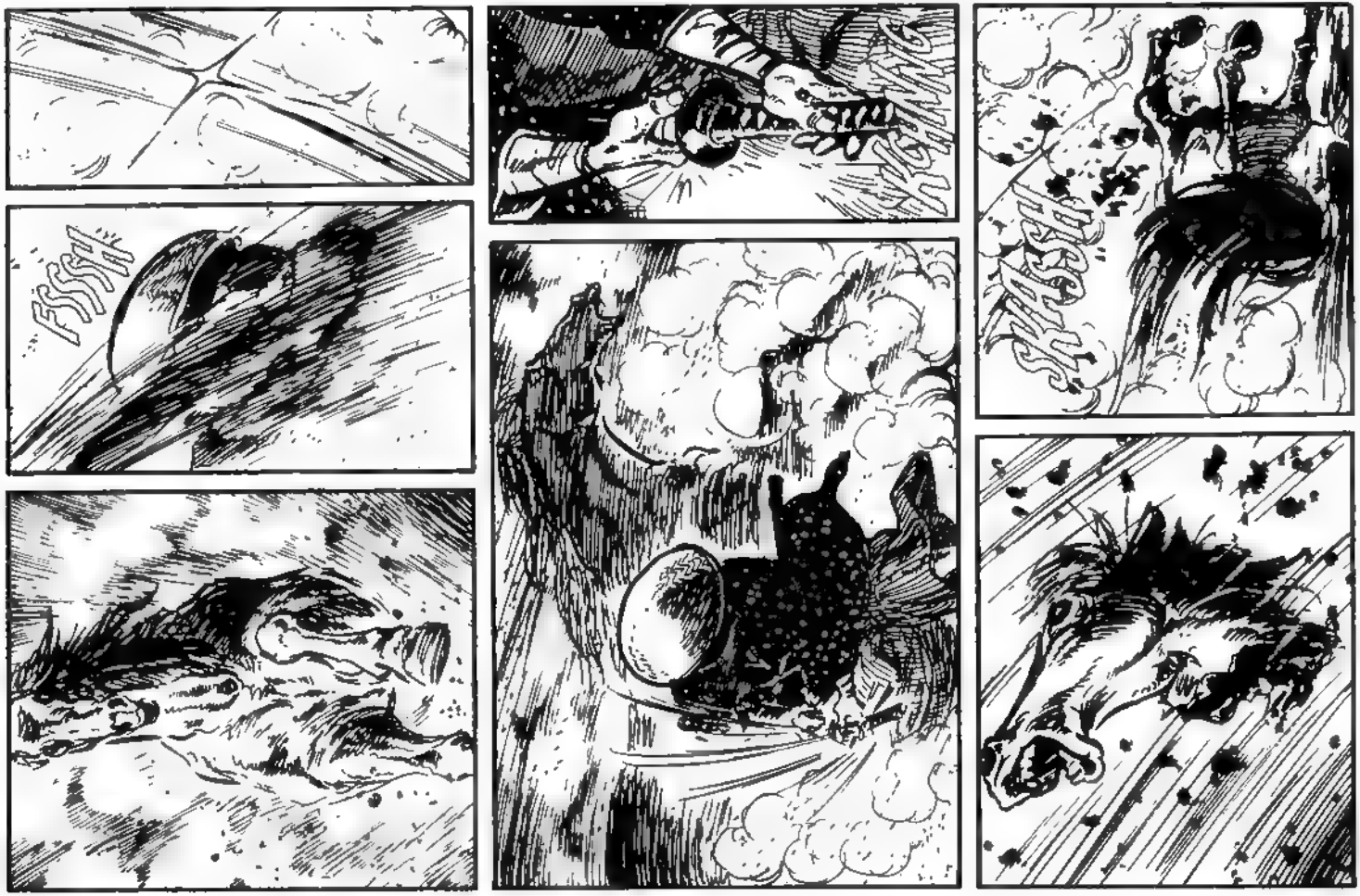
GEN!!
...OFF...
...GRRR...
WHDD
YOU WON'T MISS THAT HAT AND KIMONO...

KUCHIKI, SIR. DO YOU THINK THE TANIMURA HAN MEN WILL ATTACK?
FOOL! WOULD ANYONE SIT BY AND WATCH THEIR HAN DESTROYED? OF COURSE THEY WILL COME!
WOULDN'T THEY BE SURPRISED IF THEY KNEW WHO'S REALLY IN THE PALANQUIN...
.....

HRN?
WHAT IS IT?!
A STAMPEDE!
THEY'VE STAMPEDED A HERD OF HORSES!
DURRN
DURRN
DURRN
DURRN
DURRN
DURRN

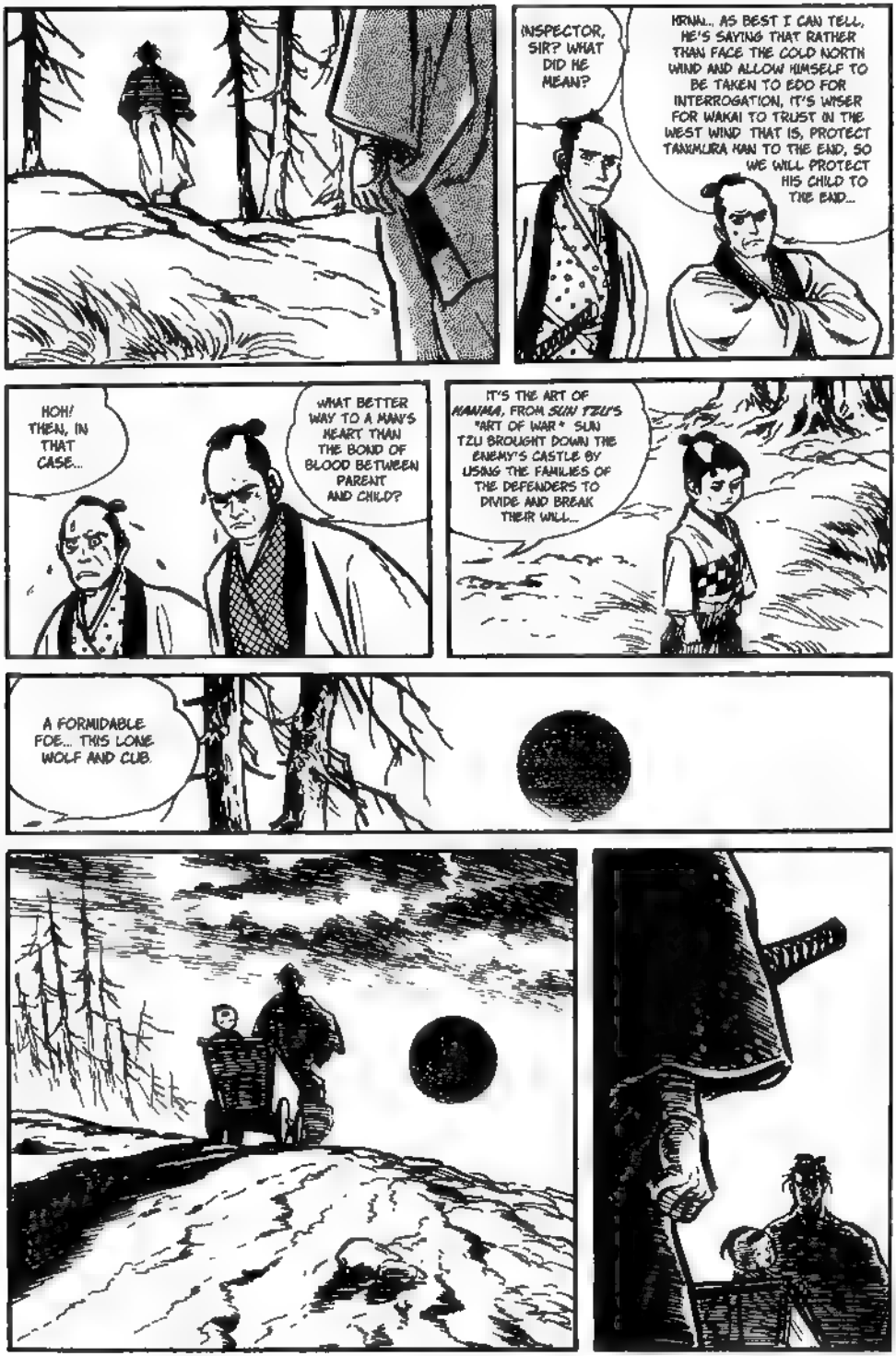

CHNNG
CHNNG
RRNG
RRNG
DRRM
DRRM
DRRM
RUN FOR IT!!
WAHHH!
KEEP UP YOUR GUARD!
THE-THE PALANQUIN!
THE PALANQUIN! SAVE THE PALANQUIN!!
FATHER!
SHŌTARŌ!!
SO! THEY USE THE HANMA STRATEGY INSIDE THE PALANQUIN MUST BE.


DRRM
DRRM
DRRM
DRRM
DRRM
DRRM


FSSSH

I HAVE YOUR CHILD! HE'S SAFE WITH US!
OUTFOXED!!

TH - THIS ISN'T WHAT WE ASKED FOR!
WHO TOLD YOU TO SAVE WAKAI'S SON?!
W - WE PAID FOR AN ASSASSINATION!
AND SO I HAVE ASSASSINATED HIM.
WH - WHAT?!
THAT'S NONSENSE! WAKAI'S STILL ALIVE! HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?!
WHEN THE WIND THAT HAS BLOWN FROM NORTH TO SOUTH SHIFTS TO BLOW FROM WEST TO EAST, DOES NOT THE WEATHER CHANGE?
DON'T BRACE YOURSELF AGAINST THE COLD NORTH WIND. THINK OF THE MOMENT WHEN THE EAST WIND HERALDS THE COMING OF SPRING.


INSPECTOR, SIR? WHAT DID HE MEAN?
HRNN... AS BEST I CAN TELL, HE'S SAYING THAT RATHER THAN FACE THE COLD NORTH WIND AND ALLOW HIMSELF TO BE TAKEN TO EDO FOR INTERROGATION, IT'S WISER FOR WAKAI TO TRUST IN THE WEST WIND THAT IS, PROTECT TAKAKURA KAN TO THE END, SO WE WILL PROTECT HIS CHILD TO THE END...
HOH! THEN, IN THAT CASE...
WHAT BETTER WAY TO A MAN'S HEART THAN THE BOND OF BLOOD BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD?
IT'S THE ART OF HANMA, FROM SUN TZU'S "ART OF WAR." SUN TZU BROUGHT DOWN THE ENEMY'S CASTLE BY USING THE FAMILIES OF THE DEFENDERS TO DIVIDE AND BREAK THEIR WILL...
A FORMIDABLE FOE... THIS LONE WOLF AND CUB.

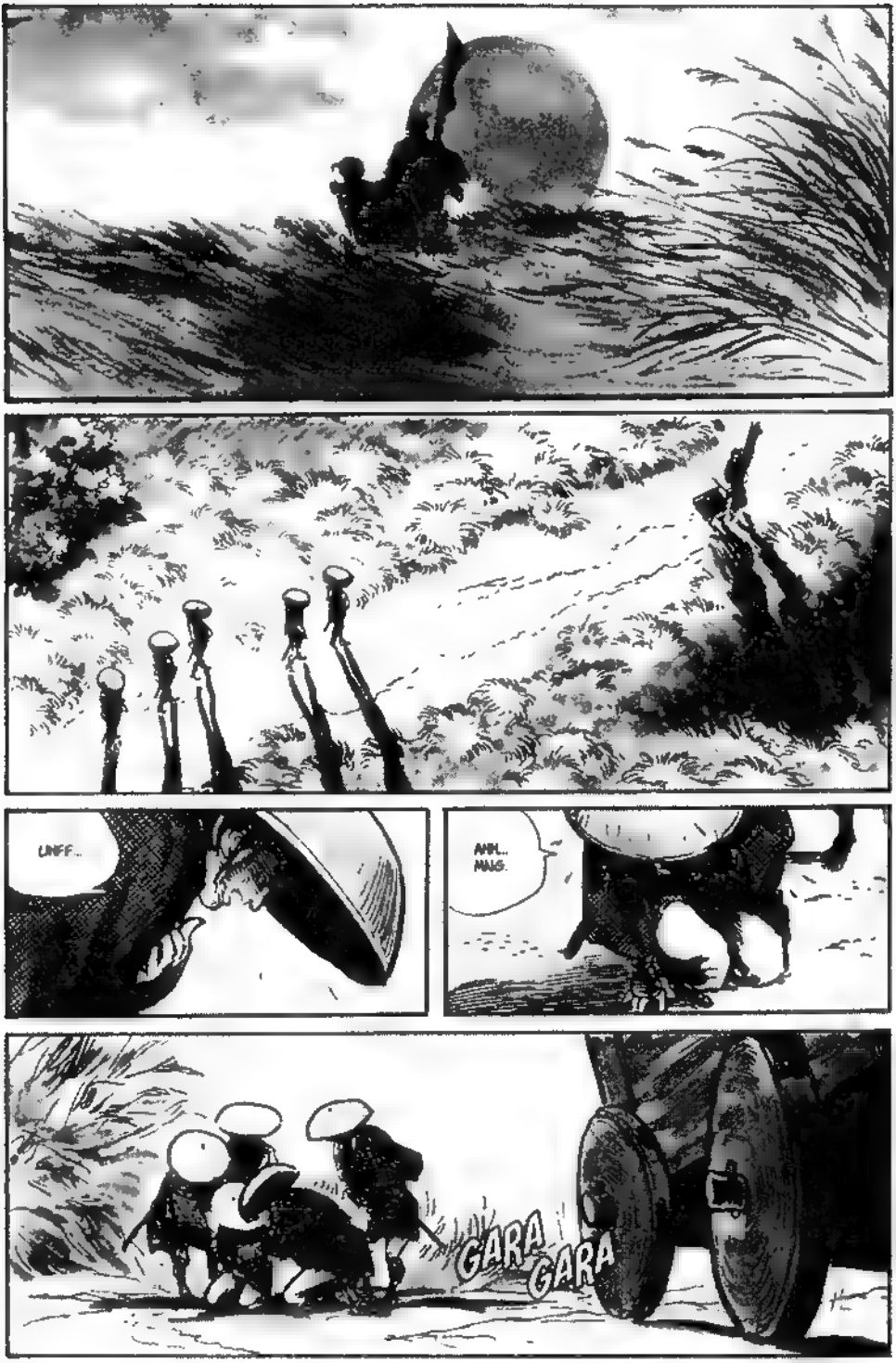
YOU?! A HIRED ASSASSIN?
INDEED...
KUCHIKI JŌNAI, LEADER OF THE YAMA-MOTSUKO

WAKAI BIT OFF HIS OWN TONGUE HE'S DEAD
SSSH
WHSS

CHNG

the fourth

Baby Cart on the River Styx

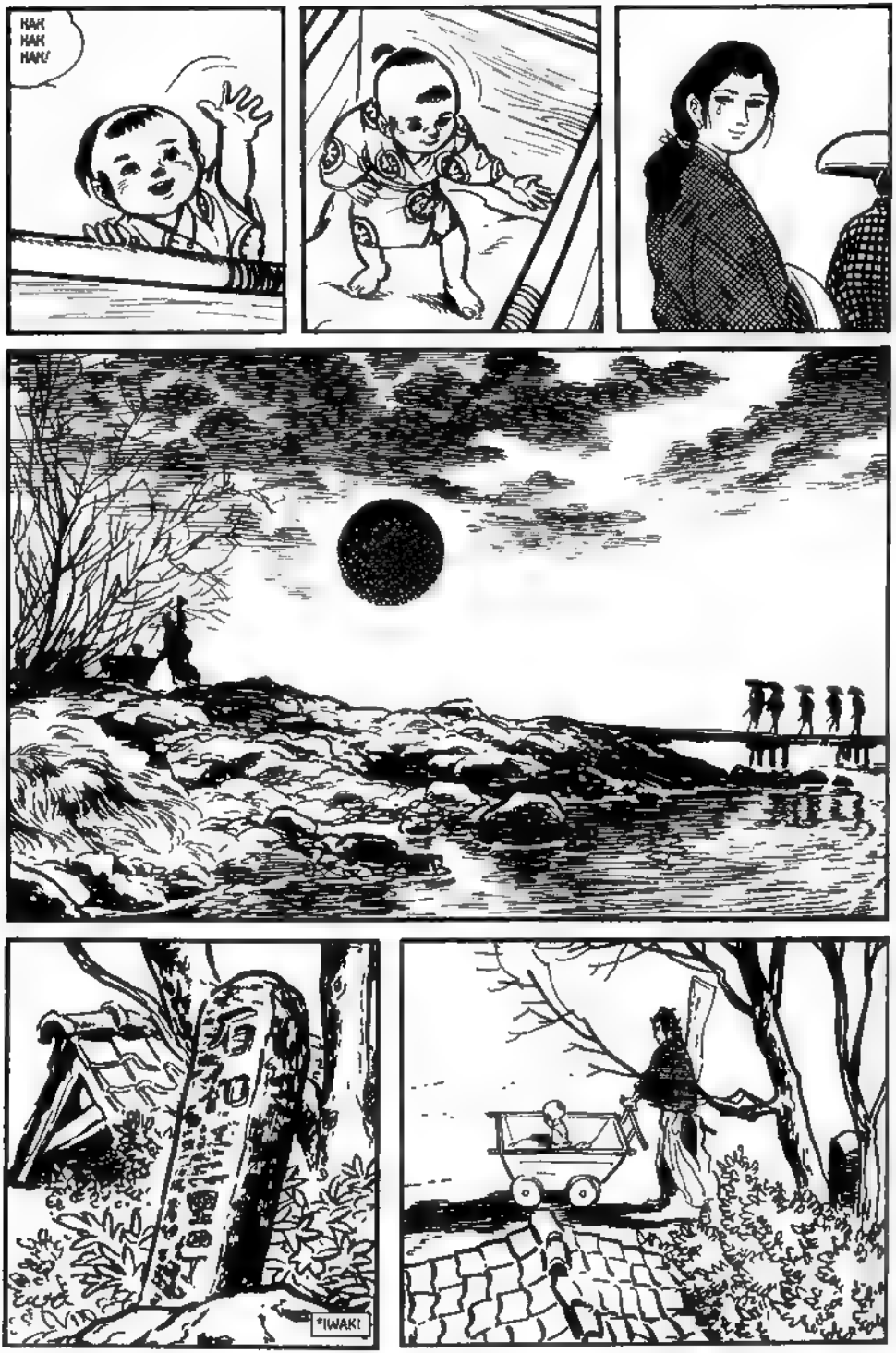

UNFF...
AHH... NUG.
GARA GARA

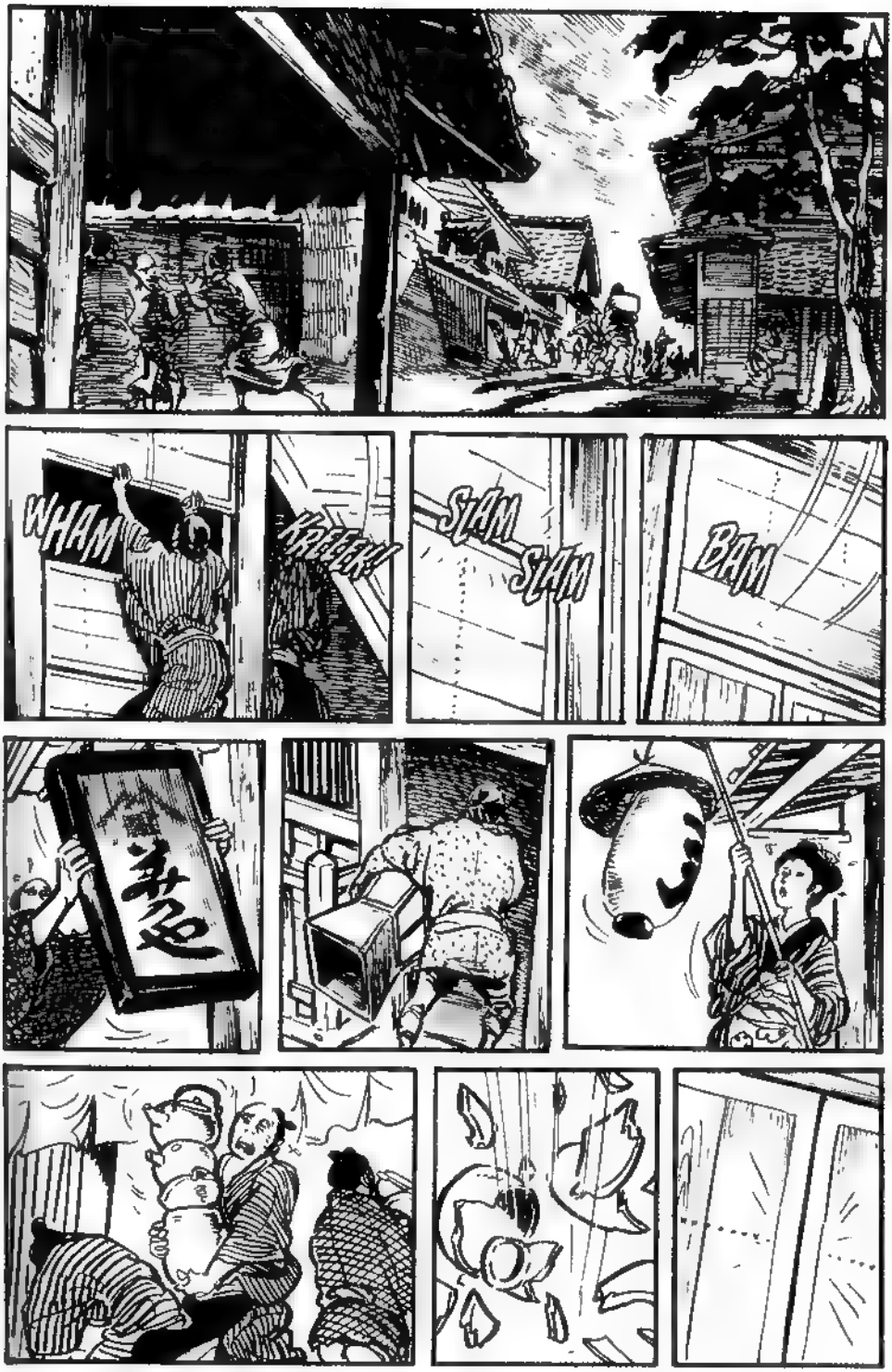
I'M SORRY TO DELAY YOU ON YOUR JOURNEY..
....
BUT IS IT TRUE YOU HIRE OUT YOUR CHILD, SIR?
MY BANNER TELLS NO LIES.
*SON FOR HIRE SWORD FOR HIRE SUIŌ SCHOOL ITTŌ ŌGAMI
THAT'S GREAT, SIR. WE'LL ONLY NEED HIM FOR A FEW MINUTES.. AND, THE FEE?
I NEED NO MONEY IT'S TIME FOR THE BOY TO BE FED.
WHAT?! BUT HOW COULD YOU..
EVEN DRESSED AS A MAN, A WOMAN IS STILL A WOMAN. IF SHE IS PRESSING HER HAND TO HER BREAST AND NEEDS A YOUNG CHILD, WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE?

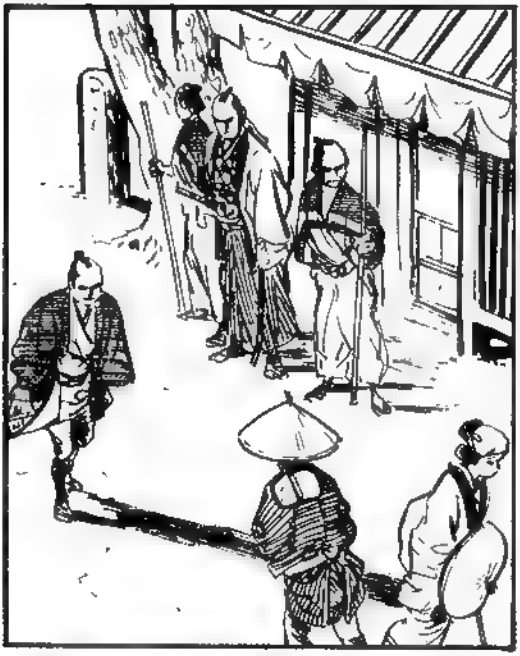
YOU'VE GOT ME THERE, SIR.
IT'S JUST LIKE YOU SAY OUR OLD LADY HERE, SHE'S FULL UP WITH MILK, AND SHE'S
WE'LL IMPOSE UPON YOUR KINDNESS, SIR.

THANK YOU, KIND SIR I'M IN YOUR DEBT.
THERE WASN'T TIME TO SPEAK BEFORE, BUT I AM O-KO OF THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ AT THE *IWAKI-JUKU* WAY STATION. YOUR ROAD LEADS YOU TO IWAKI, AND HONOR REQUIRES THAT WE ASK YOU TO PUT UP YOUR FEET A WHILE THERE AND LET US REPAY YOUR KINDNESS. BUT TODAY WE ARE ON AN URGENT JOURNEY, AND MUST CRAVE YOUR FORGIVENESS...
. . . .
AND I'M SAI-NO-ME HANGORŌ, ACTING CHIEFTAIN OF THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ.
ACTUALLY, SIR, AT THE SIXTH HOUR TOMORROW MORNING, THERE'S GONNA BE A REAL BLOODBATH ALONG THE FUEFUKI RIVER IN IWAKI. IT'S A *DEIRI* BETWEEN US AND OUR RIVALS, AND IT WON'T BE SAFE FOR A GENTLEMAN LIKE YOU AND THE LITTLE MASTER.
I'D ADVISE YOU TO AVOID IWAKI TOMORROW, EVEN IF IT MEANS YOU HAVE TRAVEL ALL NIGHT...

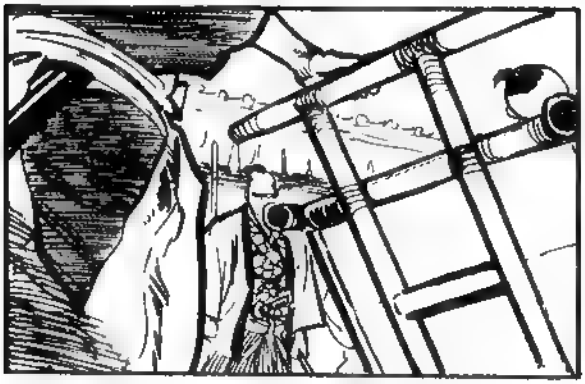
...
AND YOU?
YOU'RE ROUNDING UP MEN FOR THE FIGHT? A JIGOKU-TABI?
WE SURE ARE.
THE TOWN UP AHEAD IS THE TURF OF THE SEAWAR! FAMILY. THAT'S OUR OLD LADY'S HOMETOWN.
A JIGOKU-TABI, AND AN URGENT ONE, SIR.
AND SO, GOOD SIR, WE'LL BE PRAYING FOR YOUR SAFETY ON THE ROAD, WE WILL.
IT MAY BE WE WON'T BE ABLE TO REPAY THE DEBT WE OWE YOU, SIR.
FORGIVE US OUR FAILINGS.
IT'S RARE TO RECEIVE SUCH PROPER TREATMENT TODAY EVEN AMONG THE SAMURAI. THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ. I SHALL REMEMBER THAT NAME.

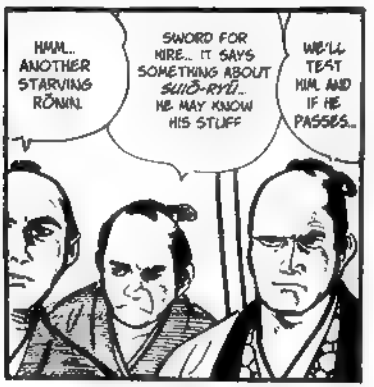

HAH
HAH
HAH!
*IWAK!


WHAM
KREEK!
SLAM
SLAM
BAM



*SON FOR HIRE, SWORD FOR HIRE SUIŌ SCHOOL, ITTŌ ŌGAMI




HMM.. ANOTHER STARVING RŌNIN.
SWORD FOR HIRE... IT SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT SUIŌ-RYŪ.. HE MAY KNOW HIS STUFF
WE'LL TEST HIM. AND IF HE PASSES..

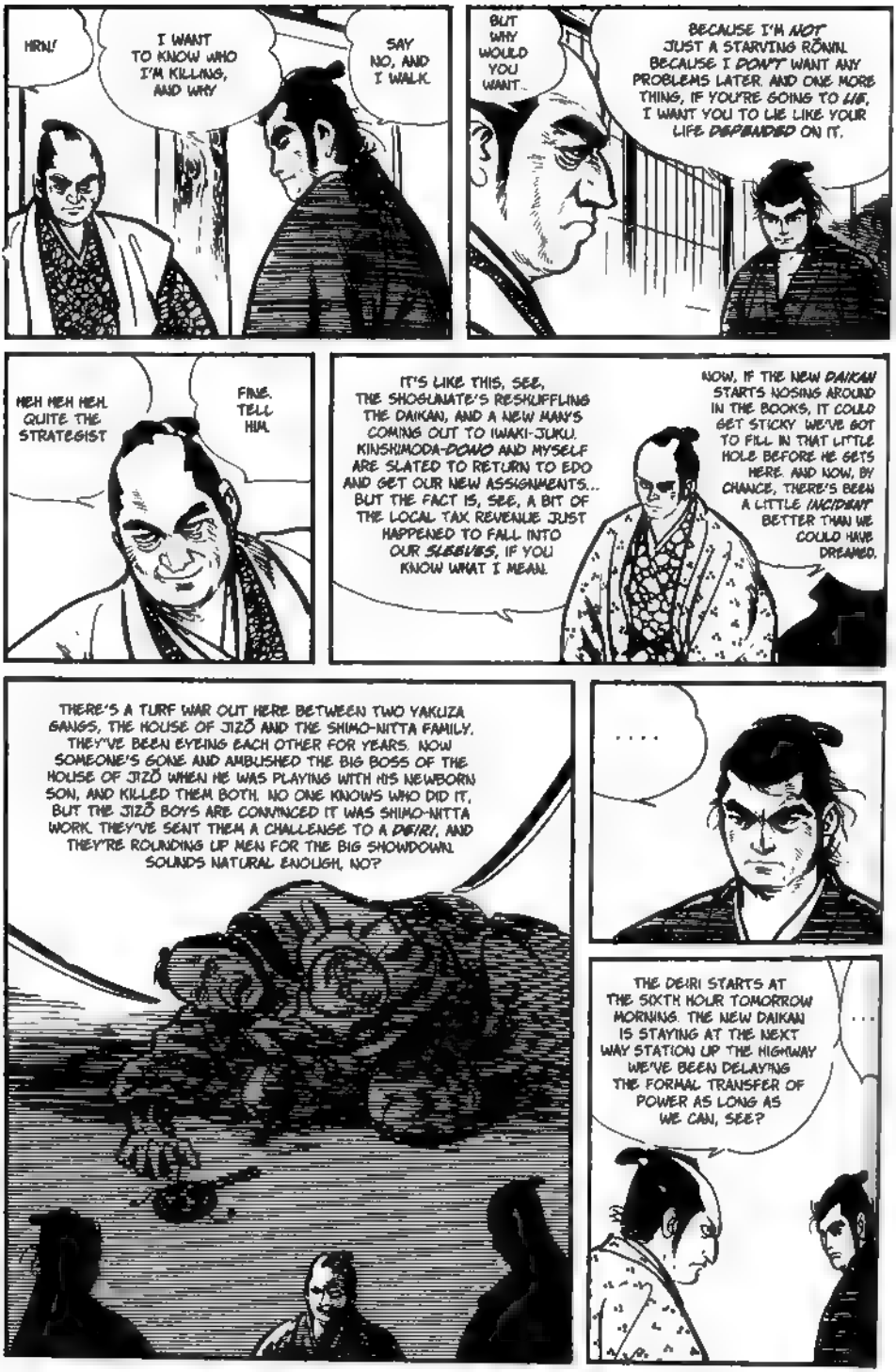
YOU WANT SOMETHING?
H- HOW ON EARTH..?
BREATHING, INTENTION, ALL IS MOVEMENT I HAD A FEELING A PIECE OF SOMEONE'S BOW MIGHT COME FLYING MY WAY
HE'S... GOOD!

WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR A MASTER SWORDSMAN LIKE YOU.
NO, NO, NOT FOR OFFICIAL BUSINESS. THERE'S SOMETHING WE'D LIKE TO ASK OF YOU, FROM THE HEART
. . . .
AND IT PAYS WELL, TOO, MM?
IWAKI DAIKANSHO.

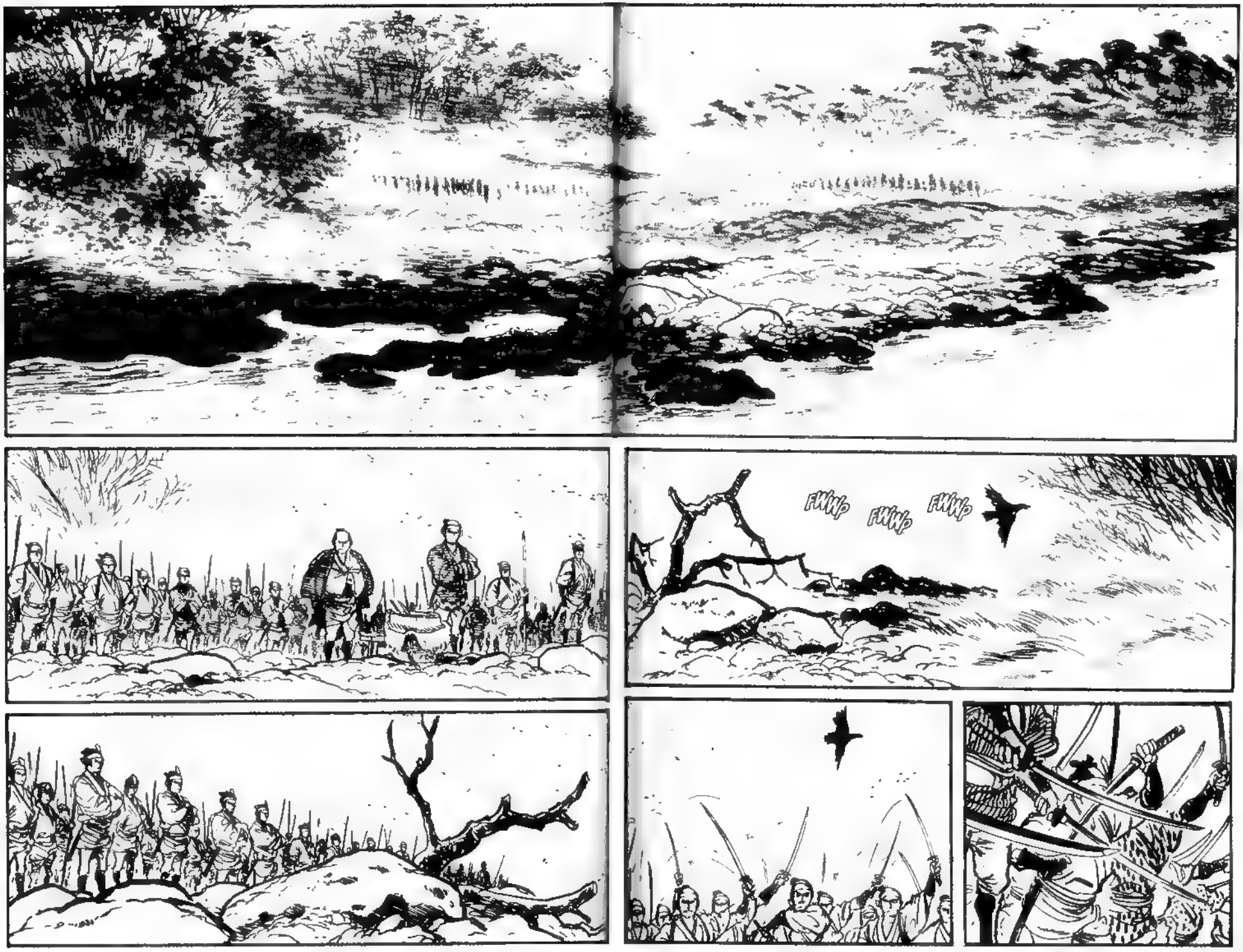
A RŌNIN KID WHO CAN IMITATE A TOSEININ? CAN YOU BEAT THAT?
HEY, KID DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO AFTER THAT?
FWP
HEE!
I GET IT! STUFF THE HEM OF YOUR KIMONO INTO YOUR BELT, AND PUT ON A SANDOGASA TRAVEL HAT. HE'S ONE TOUGH YAKUZA, HE IS!
HE'S GOT IT NAILED!

SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING.
FIKK CHKK
THIS IS KISHIMODA IHĒ, DAIKAN OF IWAKI-JUKU.
YOUR NAME, MAN!
ŌGAMI ITTŌ.
SHOW SOME RESPECT WHEN YOU TALK TO THE DAIKAN!
IT DOESN'T MATTER... MORE TO THE POINT, CAN HE DELIVER?
I DO OKAY
THAT DOESN'T TELL ME MUCH.
SCHWKKK

SHWSH
CHNNK
YES! HE'S OUR MAN!
I HAVE A REQUEST I WANT YOU TO KILL A MAN. I'M PREPARED TO OFFER ONE HUNDRED RYŌ.
. . . .
IF I HADN'T SCARED YOU UP OUT THERE, I WOULD HAVE HAD TO DO THE JOB MYSELF. QUITE A LOAD OFF THE OLD MIND, EH.
WE CAN GIVE YOU AN AD-VANCE.
BUT IN THAT CASE, I'LL HAVE TO ASK YOU TO LEAVE THE BOY WITH US.
WOULDN'T WANT YOU TO TAKE THE GOLD AND RUN! HEH HEH HEH.
THE MONEY CAN COME LATER. BUT I ALSO HAVE A CONDITION.


HRN!
I WANT TO KNOW WHO I'M KILLING, AND WHY
SAY NO, AND I WALK.
BUT WHY WOULD YOU WANT..
BECAUSE I'M *NOT* JUST A STARVING RŌNIN. BECAUSE I *DON'T* WANT ANY PROBLEMS LATER. AND ONE MORE THING, IF YOU'RE GOING TO *LIE*, I WANT YOU TO LIE LIKE YOUR LIFE *DEPENDED* ON IT.
MEH MEH MEH. QUITE THE STRATEGIST
FINE. TELL HIM.
IT'S LIKE THIS, SEE, THE SHOGUNATE'S RESHUFFLING THE DAIKAN, AND A NEW MAN'S COMING OUT TO IWAKI-JUKU. KINSHIMODA-*DONO* AND MYSELF ARE SLATED TO RETURN TO EDO AND GET OUR NEW ASSIGNMENTS... BUT THE FACT IS, SEE, A BIT OF THE LOCAL TAX REVENUE JUST HAPPENED TO FALL INTO OUR *SLEEVES*, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
NOW, IF THE NEW *DAIKAN* STARTS NOSING AROUND IN THE BOOKS, IT COULD GET STICKY. WE'VE GOT TO FILL IN THAT LITTLE HOLE BEFORE HE GETS HERE. AND NOW, BY CHANCE, THERE'S BEEN A LITTLE *INCIDENT* BETTER THAN WE COULD HAVE DREAMED.
THERE'S A TURF WAR OUT HERE BETWEEN TWO YAKUZA GANGS, THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ AND THE SHIMO-NITTA FAMILY. THEY'VE BEEN EYEING EACH OTHER FOR YEARS. NOW SOMEONE'S GONE AND AMBUSHED THE BIG BOSS OF THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ WHEN HE WAS PLAYING WITH HIS NEWBORN SON, AND KILLED THEM BOTH. NO ONE KNOWS WHO DID IT, BUT THE JIZŌ BOYS ARE CONVINCED IT WAS SHIMO-NITTA WORK. THEY'VE SENT THEM A CHALLENGE TO A *DEIRI*, AND THEY'RE ROUNDING UP MEN FOR THE BIG SHOWDOWN. SOUNDS NATURAL ENOUGH, NO?
....
THE DEIRI STARTS AT THE SIXTH HOUR TOMORROW MORNING. THE NEW DAIKAN IS STAYING AT THE NEXT WAY STATION UP THE HIGHWAY. WE'VE BEEN DELAYING THE FORMAL TRANSFER OF POWER AS LONG AS WE CAN, SEE?
...

BOTH SIDES HAVE BEEN BRINGING IN REINFORCEMENTS, AND IT'S GOING TO BE A MOB SCENE. WE'LL TELL OUR NEW DAIKAN ABOUT IT, AND BEG HIM TO HELP US. THEN WE RUSH TO THE SCENE.
EXCEPT, WE'RE BIT LATE GETTING THERE, AREN'T WE?
SNKK
AND BEFORE WE ARRIVE, YOU KILL THE DAIKAN.
FWWP
AND ALL HIS MEN, OF COURSE. AND THEN WE SIMPLY EXPLAIN THAT THE NEW MAN GOT TRAPPED IN THE MIDDLE OF A YAKUZA TURF WAR, AND WAS KILLED. NORMALLY AFTER A BIG RUMBLE LIKE THIS, WE HAVE THE GANGS HAND OVER A COUPLE OF THEIR BOYS, OR WE FRAME SOMEONE TO WRAP THINGS UP
BUT WE CAN'T LET THOSE YAKUZA SWINE GO AROUND KILLING DAIKAN, CAN WE? WE'LL ARREST THEM ALL, MURDER OF A PUBLIC OFFICAL. CONFISCATE THEIR HOMES AND ASSETS. THEY'VE BEEN SOCKING IT AWAY FROM THEIR GAMBLING OPERATIONS, SO IT SHOULD BE QUITE A BUNDLE.
FWWP
HEH HEH HEH. IF WE PLUG UP THE HOLE IN OUR TAX NUMBERS WITH ALL THAT LOOT, THEN IT'LL ALL BE WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE BY THE TIME THE NEXT DAIKAN COMES. THREE BIRDS WITH ONE STONE, SEE? HEH HEH HEH.
ALLOW ME TO ADD ONE THING.
IT WAS YOU AND YOUR MEN WHO KILLED THE BOSS OF THE HOUSE OF JIZŌ AND HIS BABY BOY...
YOU CAN'T DENY THAT, CAN YOU?
DAMN RIGHT WE DID! NOW, IF YOU KNOW THIS MUCH, YOU CAN'T BACK DOWN.
I'LL DO IT


FWWp
FWWp
FWWp

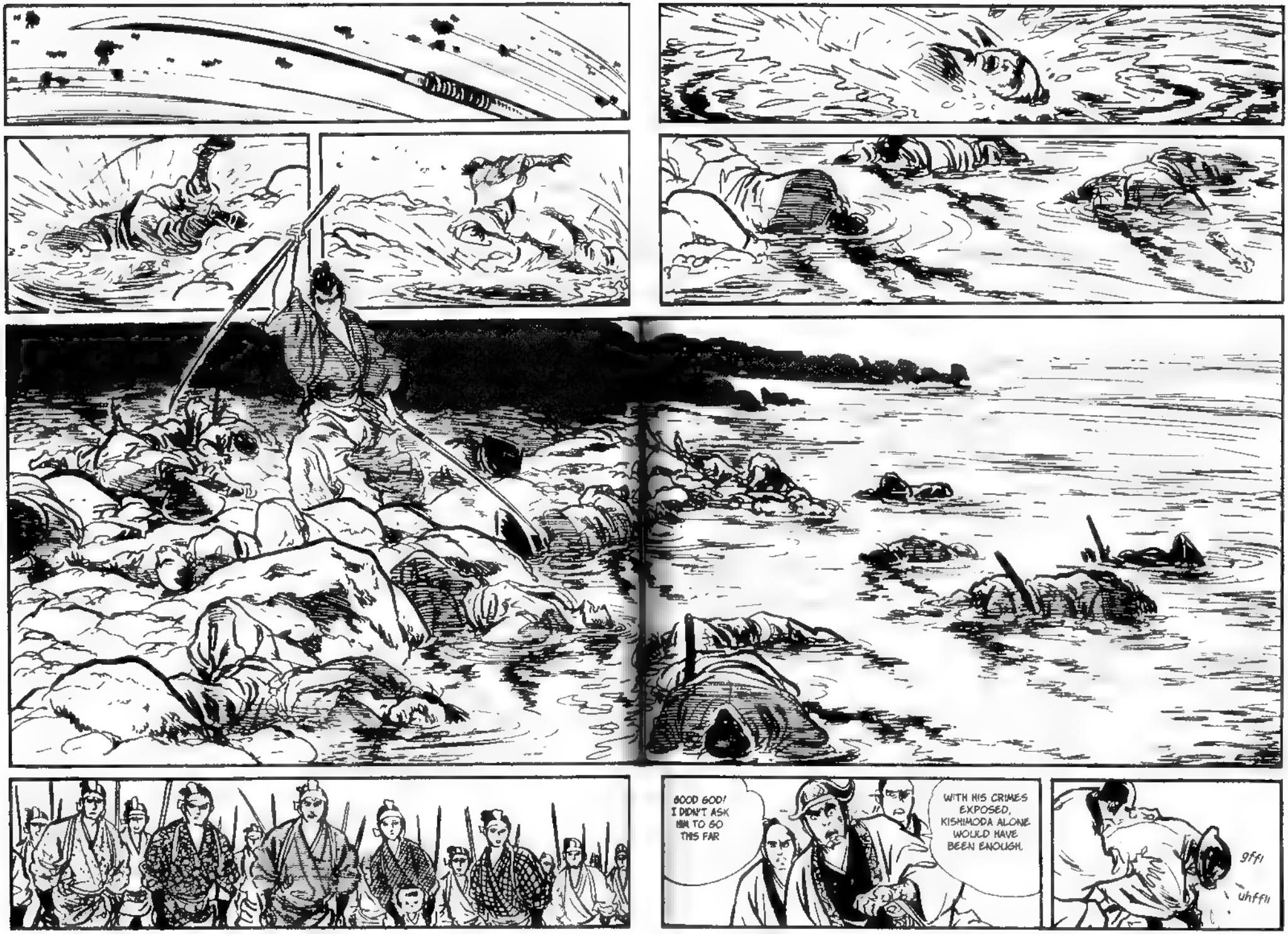
CARA
CARA
SHEATHE YOUR SWORDS ANOTHER HOUR! DO THAT, AND THERE SHALL BE NO POINTLESS BLOODSHED!
SIR!
LITTLE BOY!
MY LITTLE BOY!
HOLD!

BOTH SIDES, DESIST! THERE MUST BE NO BATTLE!
KNOW THAT I AM ATOBE MASAMOSHIN, NEW DAIKAN OF IWAKI JUKU! CEASE AND DESIST! CEASE AND DESIST!
WHDD
UGH!
HMPH, THEN
ARREST THE LOT OF THEM FOR THE MURDER OF OUR NEW DAIKAN AND IF ANYONE RESISTS
SHOOT THEM DEAD!

HEH HEH HEH. GOOD WORK, MY MAN.
SO THIS *WAS* THE PLAN AFTER ALL.
WHAT?! YOU KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN, AND YOU *STILL* TOOK THE JOB?!
CORRUPT OR NOT, YOU'RE STILL A *DAIKAN* SERVING THE *SHOGUNATE* I COULDN'T KILL YOU UNLESS I COULD KEEP THE LAW OFF MY TAIL. HOW BEST TO MURDER HIM? *THAT'S* WHAT I WAS THINKING.
WH - *WHAT?!*
YOU?! AN *ASSASSIN?!*
INDEED LONE WOLF AND CUB.. I COME FOR *YOU!*
F- FIRE!
SHOOT HIM!!

BUDDABUDDABUDDA
HYUU HYUU
SPANG
KANG
SKANG

SKSSH
CHUKK
GSSH
SHNNG
KILL HIM!
KILL HIM!
KRK!!
PSSH


GOOD GOD! I DIDN'T ASK HIM TO GO THIS FAR
WITH HIS CRIMES EXPOSED, KISHIMODA ALONE WOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH.
gffl
uhffll

DAIGORO. WE'RE LEAVING.
A BABY CARRIAGE... ON THE RIVER SANZU.

the fifth

Suiō School Zanbatō

RN?!

YAH! UP THERE!
THAT LITTLE BRAT!
SUCH INSOLENCE!
BRING HIM DOWN!
WHOA!
IS THAT YOUR CHILD, YOU CURR?
IT IS.

THE INSOLENCE OF SPLATTERING URINE ON THE FACE OF THE NOBLE BESSHO MONDO, O-BANGASHIRA OF MITO HAN, IS BEYOND PARDON!
EVEN A CHILD CANNOT BE EXCUSED! HAND HIM OVER FOR DANZAI!
I REFUSE..
WHAT?! OBSTRUCT JUSTICE, AND SHARE THE CRIME!
IS THERE A PARENT ALIVE WHO WOULD NOT PROTECT HIS CHILD?
YOU TALK BACK WITH NO PENANCE AT ALL! UNFORGIVABLE!
CUT HIM DOWN! KILL THEM BOTH, FATHER AND CHILD!
WAIT!
IT WAS MY OWN FAILING TO ALLOW MYSELF TO BE SHOWERED UPON WITH URINE. IF THE GENTLEMAN WILL APOLOGIZE ON BEHALF OF HIS CHILD, THAT WILL BE SUFFICIENT. I WILL SEEK NO FURTHER PUNISHMENT.
I REFUSE..
WHAT?!
YOU SAY YOU FEEL NO NEED TO APOLOGIZE, EVEN WHEN YOUR CHILD SPRAYS THE FACE OF A BUSHI WITH HIS URINE?
I DON'T... IT STRIKES ME AS STUPID TO RANT ABOUT BUSHI AND SAVING FACE BECAUSE A LITTLE BOY HAD TO PEE... WHY SHOULD I APOLOGIZE?

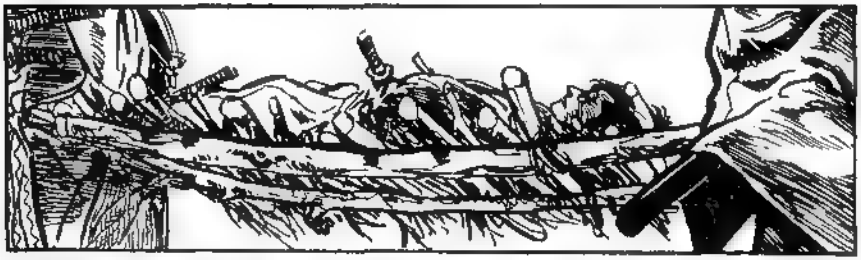
I INTENDED TO TREAT YOU GENTLY BUT TO BE SPOKEN TO THUS IS A LOSS OF FACE FOR ANY BUSHI!!
YOU SHALL APOLOGIZE AT THE END OF MY SWORD! WILL THAT SATISFY YOU?!
I, TOO, WILL DRAW RATHER THAN APOLOGIZE.
SCUM! HAVE YOU NO SHAME?!
UNBOUNDED INSOLENCE!
YOU MEAN STAY OUT OF THIS. I ALONE RECEIVED THE INSULT.
....
HEH HEH. THE POOR BASTARD..
DOES HE THINK HE CAN DEFEAT THE MUGYŌ-RYŪ SUEMONOGIRI TECHNIQUE OF BESSHO-SAMA, THE FENCING MASTER OF MITO HAN?!

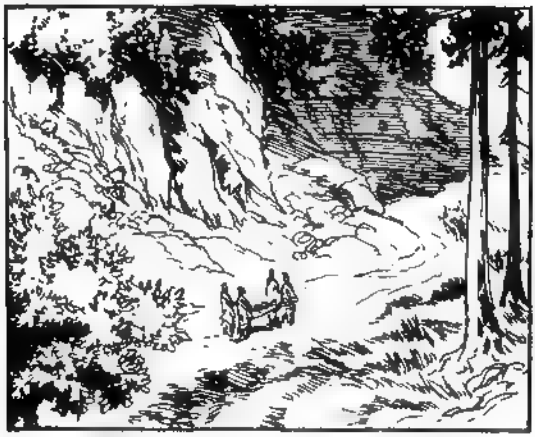
LET ME ASK BEFORE WE START...
IS THIS A *FORMAL* DUEL?
A FORMAL DUEL, THAT WILL LEAVE NO ANIMOSITY BEHIND
I'D LIKE PROOF OF THAT.
YOU ARE DISCONTENT WITH THE WITNESSES?
I AM ON MITO HAN TERRITORY THE WITNESSES, ARE ALL MITO HAN *HANSHI!*
AND *YOU* ARE MITO'S *Ō-BANGASHIRA*, THE LEADER OF ITS ARMED FORCES. EVEN SHOULD I WIN TODAY...
I MIGHT BE CARVED TO BITS BY YOUR *HANSHI!*..
OR SHOT DOWN BY YOUR RIFLE COMPANIES OR ARCHERS. IN ANY CASE, I DOUBT I COULD LEAVE THE HAN ALIVE.
WHAT IS FORMAL ABOUT THAT?
I SEE...

*DUEL
*ACCEPTED: MONDO
NITO KAN. BESSHO MONDO.
SAKUSHŪ RŌNIN. ŌGAMI ITTŌ.
FASSH!

FWSSH
SKASH
SKUSSH
SKUSSH

RRRNG.
.. SUIGÔ-RYÛ.. ZANBATÔ..?!
MASTER!"
MY GOD..!
IF YOU BREAK HIS PROMISE, YOU SHAME THE DEAD!





AAH..

FORGIVE ME, BESSHO-DONO. YOUR ADVOCACY OF THE POLITICAL PRIMACY OF THE IMPERIAL COURT IN KYOTO HAS SWUNG THE OPINION OF THE HAN TO YOUR SIDE.. AND HAS DISMAYED THE TOKUGAWA CLAN RULERS IN EDO.
THE TOKUGAWA ARE SURE TO SUPPRESS MITO HAN FOR INSURRECTION IF SUCH TALK IS NOT STOPPED. YET IF I HAD ARRESTED SUCH A LOYAL RETAINER FOR TREASON, THE YOUNG SAMSHI WHO FOLLOW YOU WOULD HAVE RUN WILD, AND MITO WOULD BE SHAKEN TO ITS ROOTS.

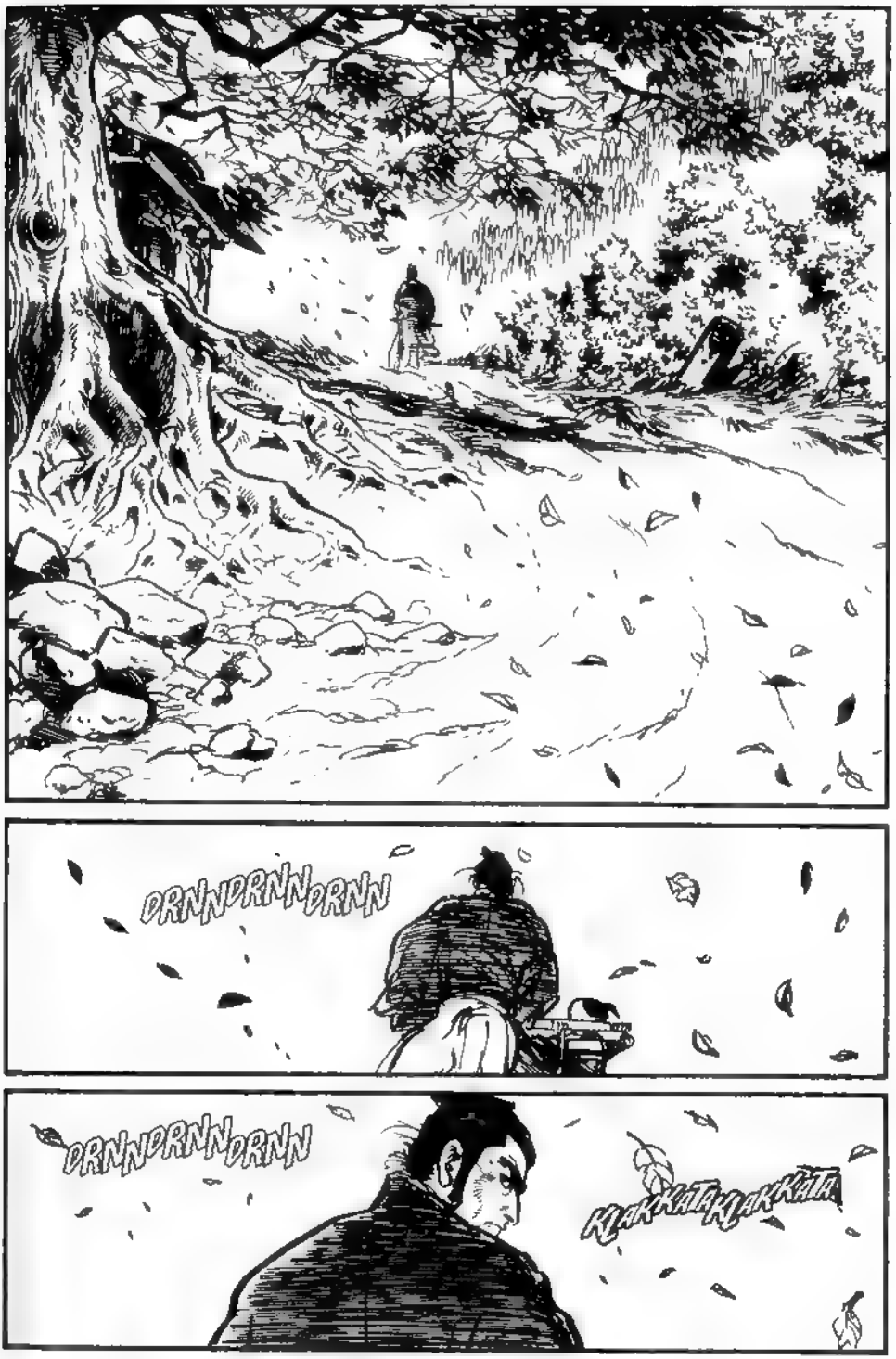
AND THUS I SWALLOWED MY TEARS AND HIRED AN ASSASSIN, OLD FRIEND. IT IS ALL FOR THE FAMILY OUR LORDSHIP'S CLAN.

FORGIVE ME, BESSHO DONO.
I AM OLD, MY YEARS SHORT I SHALL APOLOGIZE TO YOU IN THE SHADOWS OF MEIDO.

NONETHELESS, GO-KARŌ.. THIS ASSASSIN, THIS LONE WOLF AND CUB. HE DELIBERATELY USED HIS OWN CHILD TO INSULT BESSHO-DONO AND LURE HIM INTO A FORMAL DUEL.
NO NORMAL ASSASSIN WOULD SCHEME SO CAREFULLY WE MUST ORDER OUR ARCHERS AND RIFLEMEN TO EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION AGAINST HIM.
NO. THERE WILL BE NO SUCH ORDERS..
I NEVER DREAMED HE WOULD ASK FOR A WRITTEN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF A FORMAL DUEL FROM BESSHO-DONO. NOW WE CAN DO NOTHING THAT WOULD DISHONOR THE DEAD
BUT, WE CAN'T JUST LET HIM..
WE HAVE NO CHOICE... OBSERVE NOW HE HAS ENTERED DEEP INTO OUR TERRITORY, PERFORMED HIS DUTY, AND NOW WALKS BOLDLY OUT AGAIN, WITH RIGHTEOUSNESS ON HIS SIDE. THIS IS THE STRATEGY OF KŌMA, FROM SUN TZU'S "ART OF WAR".
DID NOT SUN TZU WRITE THAT TO ENTER A LAND AND WIN THE TRUST OF ITS PEOPLE, TO TAKE UPON YOURSELF THE ARMOR OF A JUST CAUSE, IS TO MAKE YOURSELF INVULNERABLE TO YOUR ENEMY'S GENERALS?
HE IS A DREADFUL OPPONENT, THIS LONE WOLF AND CUB..
別所
*BESSHO

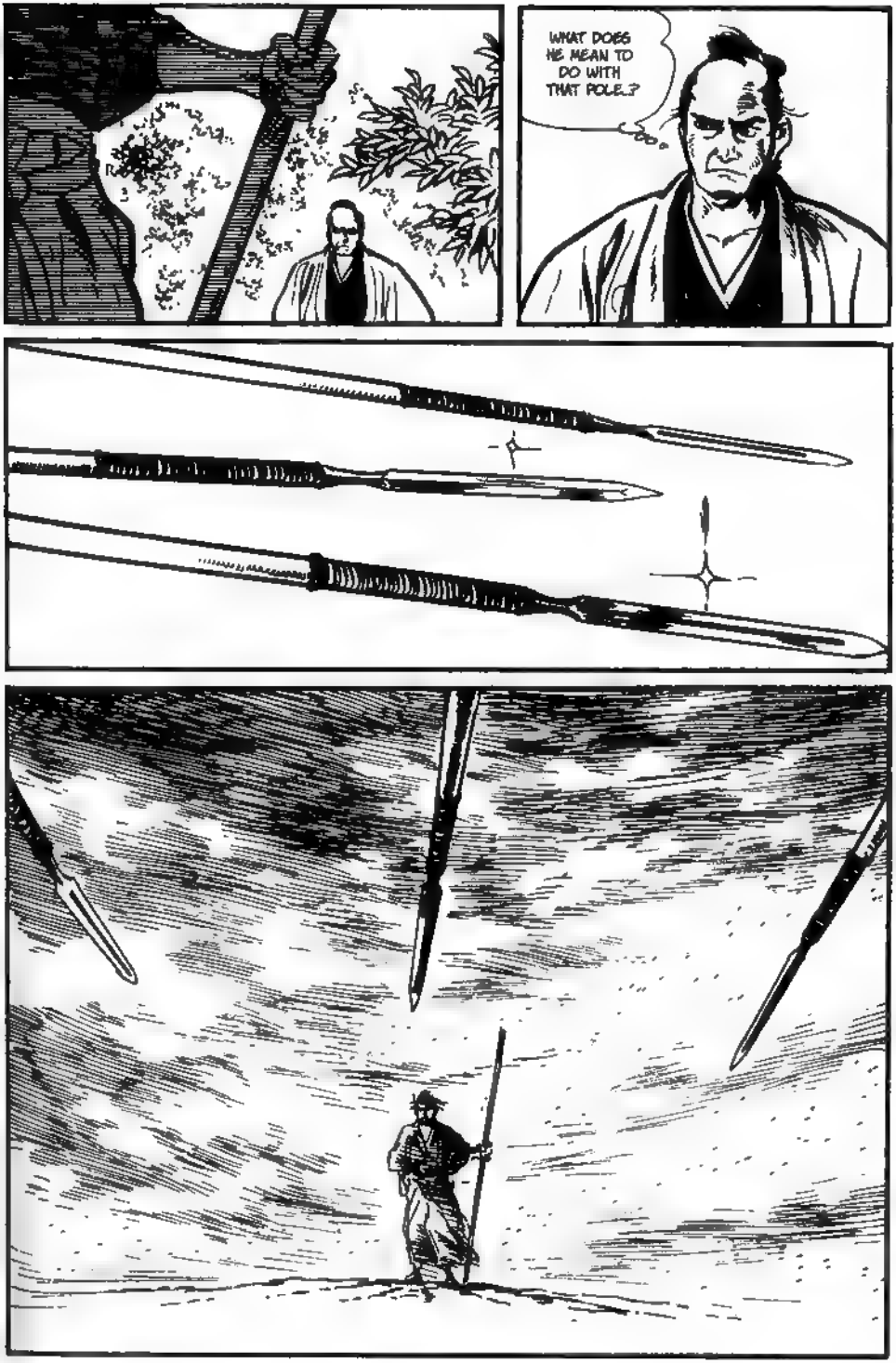
KRIK...
UU...
THAT DAMNED RŌNIN!
CAN WE REALLY JUST LET HIM WALK RIGHT OUT OF OUR HALL?!
IF WE ATTACK HIM, WE'LL BESMIRCH THE GOOD NAME OF OUR MASTER WHO SIGNED THAT AGREEMENT!
BUT, BUT...!
TO LOSE OUR MASTER TO A NAMELESS RŌNIN...
WE JUST LET HIM KILL AND LEAVE?!
IF RUMOR OF THIS GETS OUT, WE'LL ALL LOSE FACE.
THAT'S RIGHT! HE MUST BE KILLED!
WAIT! I HAVE AN IDEA! WE HANDPICK A GROUP OF THE STRONGEST OF ALL OUR MASTER'S STUDENTS, AND WE DEMAND THAT HE AGREE TO A SECOND FORMAL DUEL!
IF WE SAY IT'S A CHALLENGE, TO RESTORE THE FACE OF OUR MASTER AND OUR SWORD SCHOOL, I'M SURE IT WILL STAND!

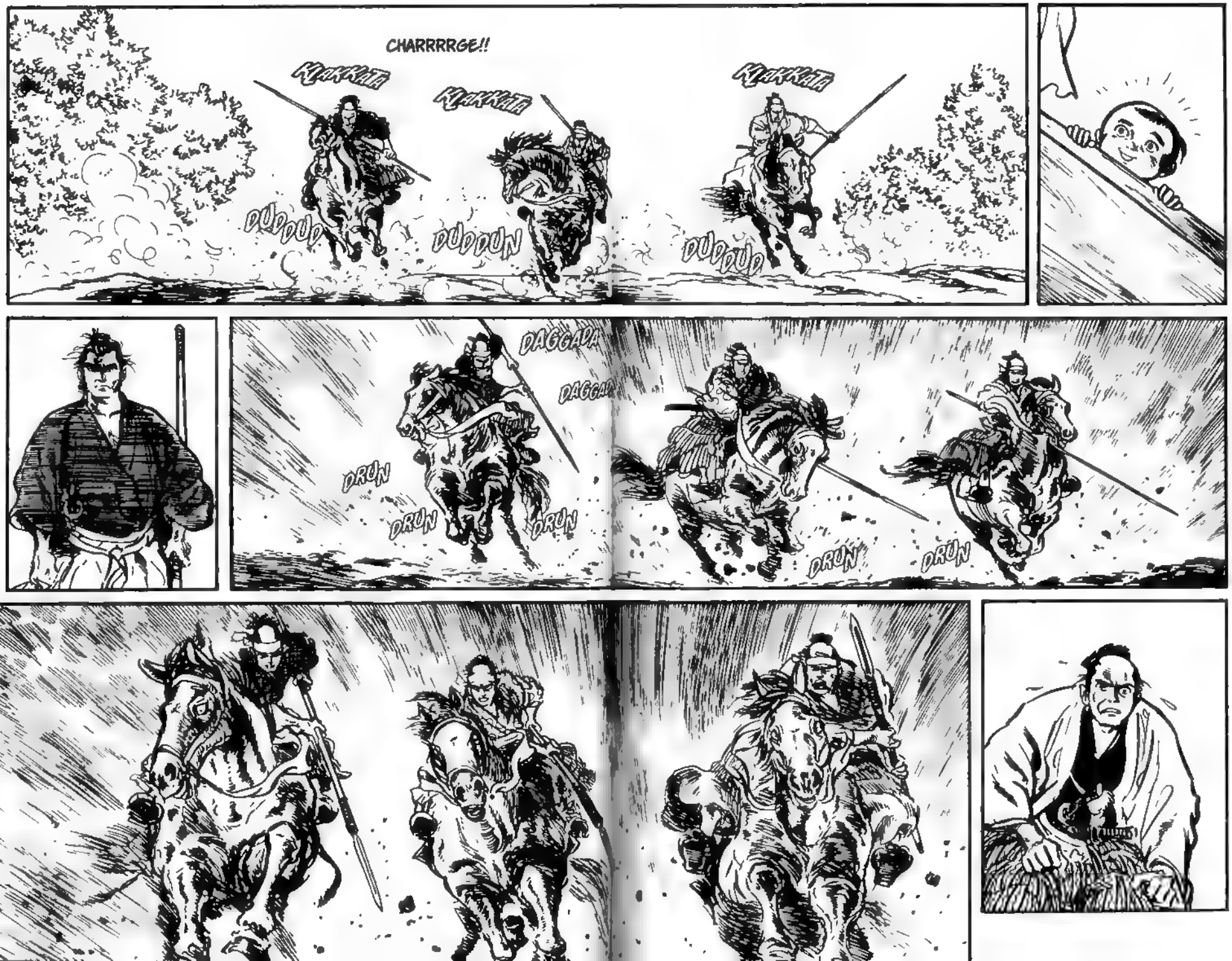
YES!
DO IT!
BUT IF IT'S A DUEL, WE CAN'T ATTACK EN MASSE! IT WON'T BE EASY FOR TWO OR THREE OF US TO DEFEAT SUCH A FIGHTER
IN HIS FINAL MOMENTS, THE MASTER SAID SOMETHING ABOUT THE SUIŌ-RYŪ, AND "ZANBATŌ"..
THE RŌNIN'S SWORDPLAY WAS TRULY REMARKABLE.
YOU'RE RIGHT HE USED A DŌTANUKI BATTLEFIELD SWORD
IT TAKES INCREDIBLE AGILITY TO FIGHT WITH SUCH A SHORT, HEAVY WEAPON
SUIŌ-RYŪ ? I'VE NEVER HEARD OF THAT SCHOOL. AND THEN THIS.. ZANBATŌ?
THAT'S STILL A MYSTERY. BUT WE DO KNOW THAT WE MUST RESTRICT HIS FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT..
YES! THAT'S IT!
WHAT IS?!
HORSES! IF WE'RE ON HORSEBACK, HE WON'T BE ABLE TO MOVE LIKE THAT! AND THAT SHORT SWORD OF HIS WILL BE USELESS!
WE DO IT!


DRNNDRNNDRNN
DRNNDRNNDRNN
KJAKKATAKJAKKATA

DRUN
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN
KYAKKATAKYAK
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN

SAKUSHŪ RŌNIN, ŌGAMI ITTŌ! WE REQUEST A DUEL FOR THE HONOR OF OUR SWORD SCHOOL! FACE US IN FORMAL COMBAT!
WE WON'T LET YOU REFUSE!
..
I SHALL BEAR WITNESS TO THE DUEL!
KAWW
KAWW

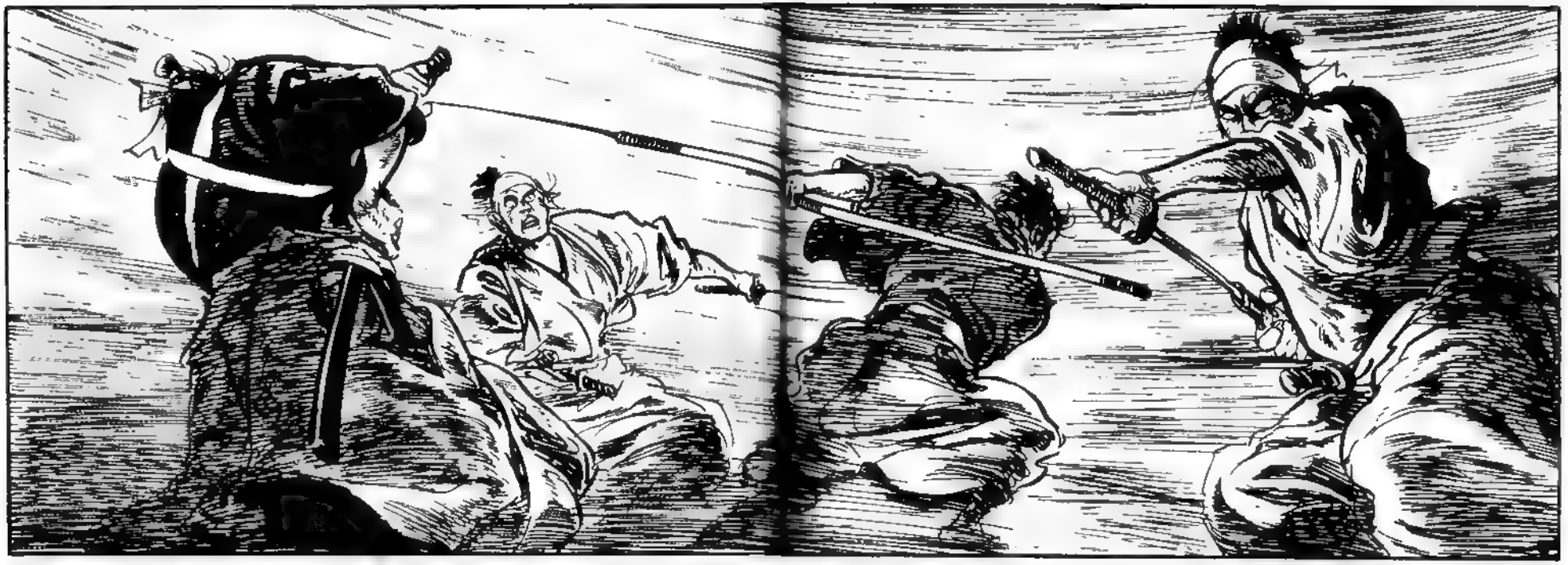

WHAT DOES HE MEAN TO DO WITH THAT POLE..?


CHARRRRGE!!
KIAKKIA
KIAKKIA
KIAKKIA
DUDDUD
DUDDUN
DUDDUD
DAGGADA
DAGGADA
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN
DRUN

KSHING
VZZZ
SKASSH

DRNN
DRNN
SKASSH

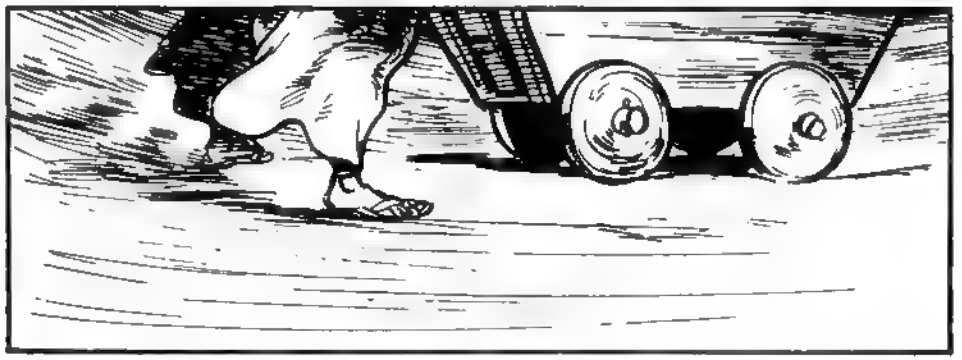
UHHH!
YHHH!
I COME FOR YOU!!
SRNNG

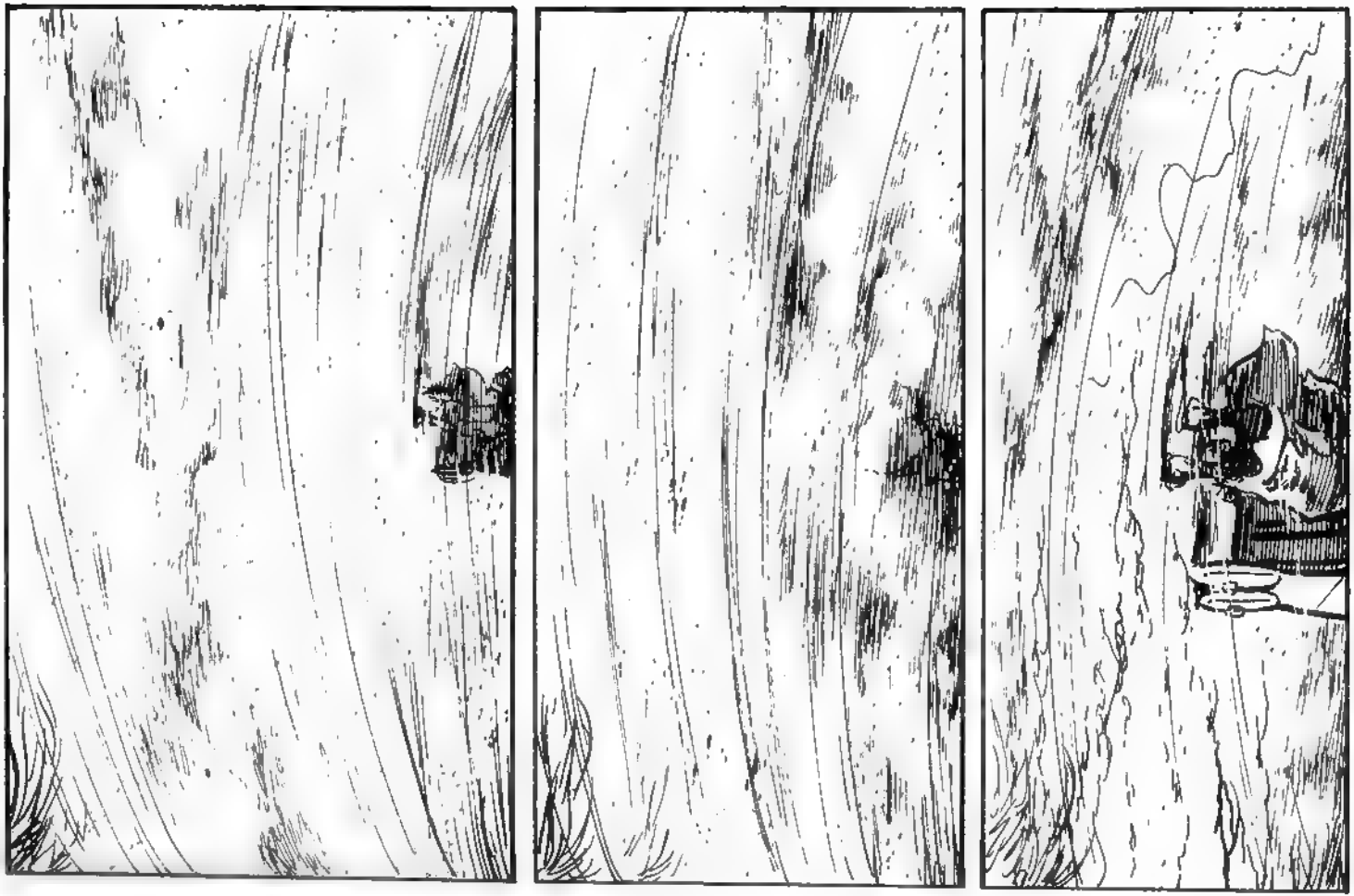


THDD
HHDD
CHNNG

MY GOD, OH MY GOD..

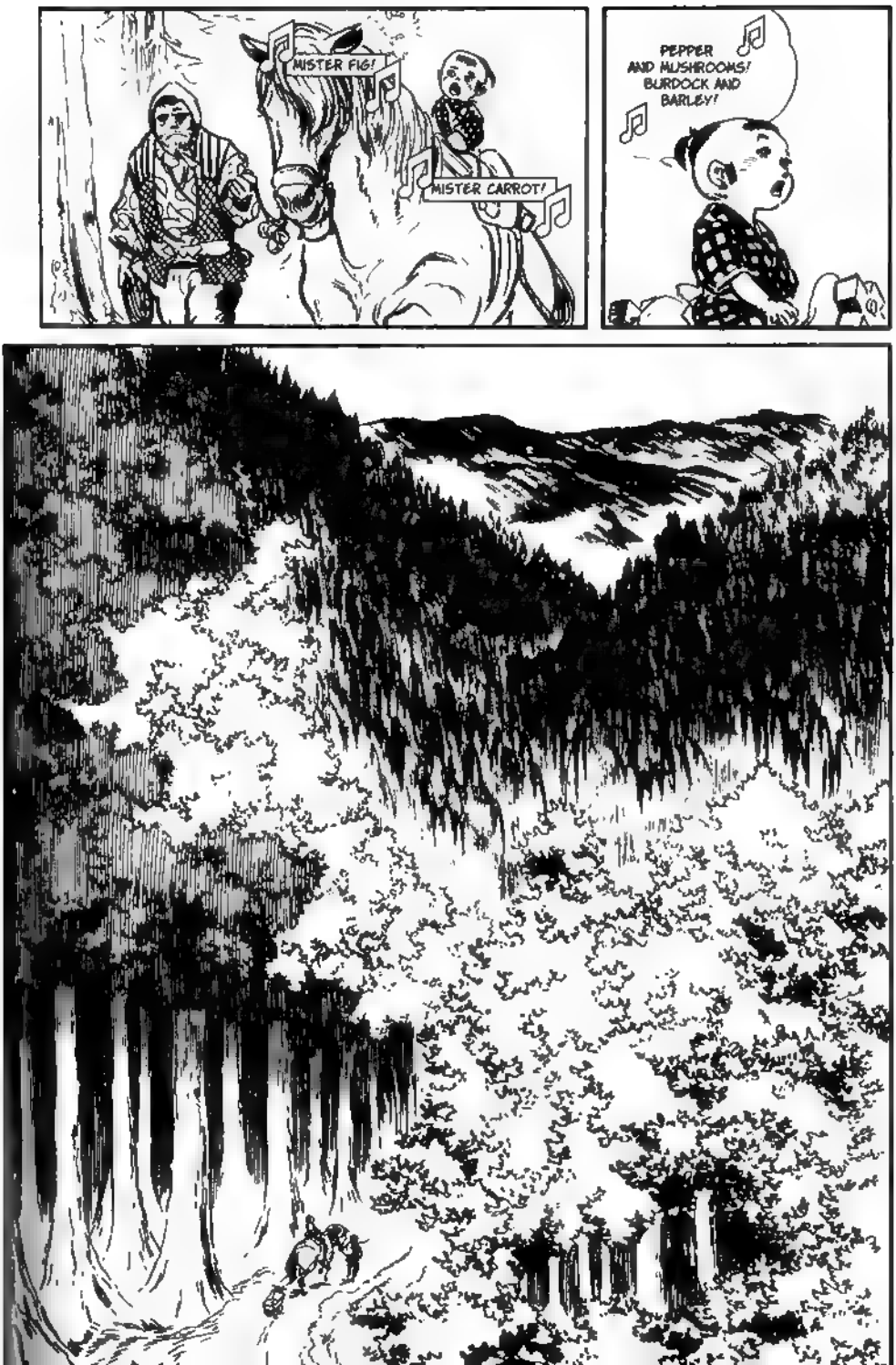
THE ZANBATŌ... HORSE-CUTTING STROKE..?



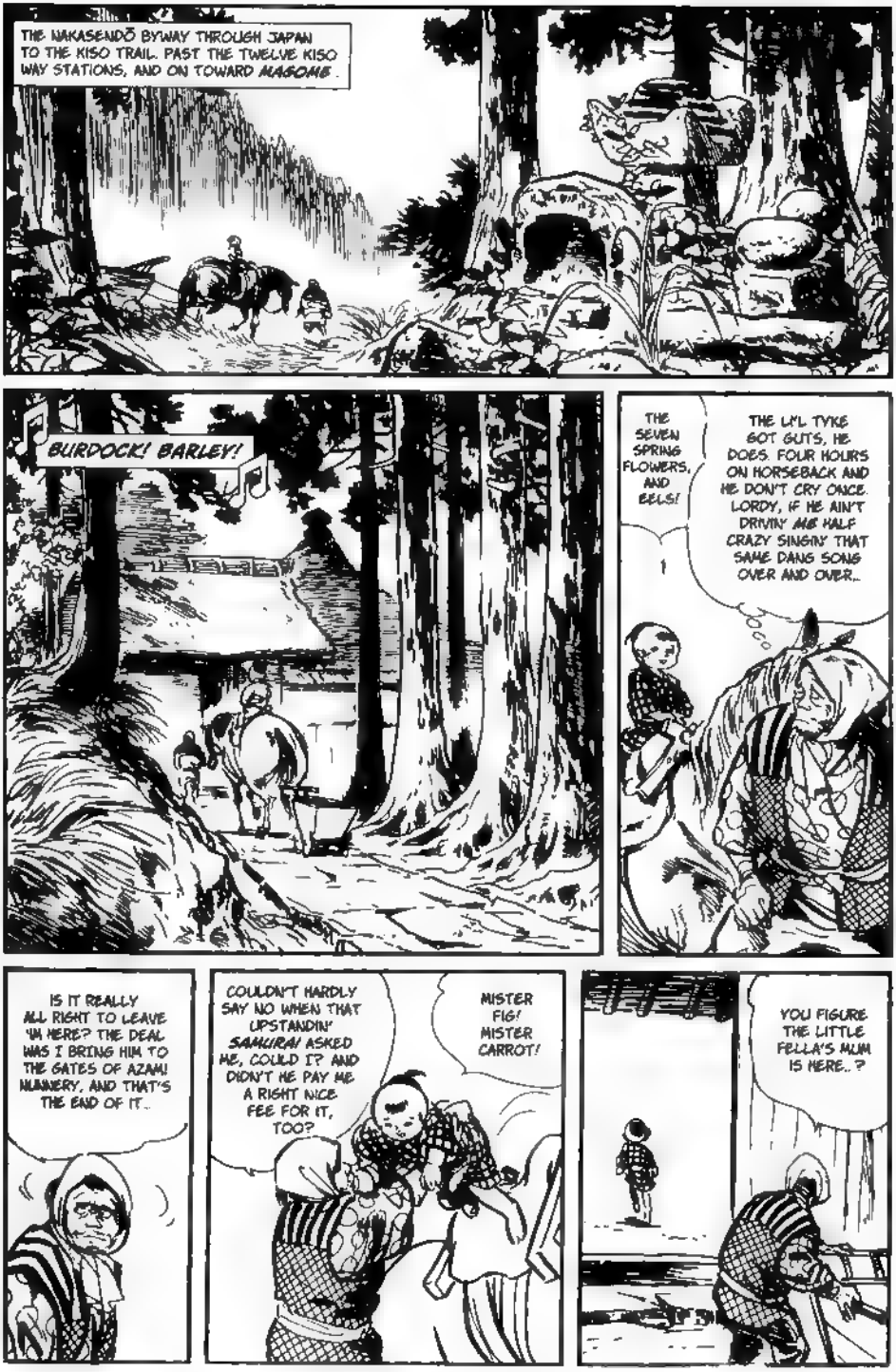


the sixth

Waiting for the Rains


MISTER FIG!
MISTER CARROT!
PEPPER AND MUSHROOMS! BURDOCK AND BARLEY!

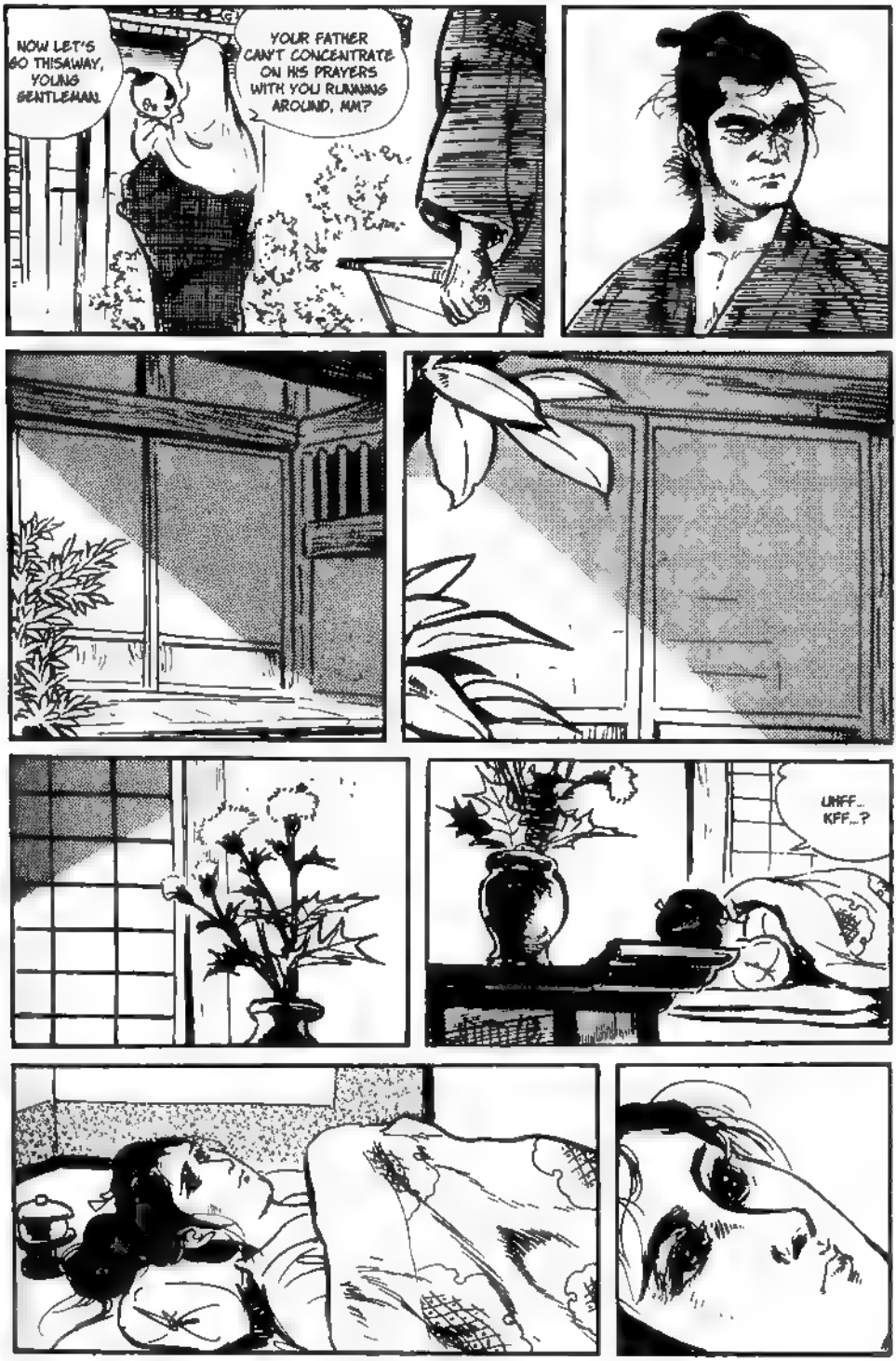
MISTER FIG!
MISTER CARROT!
PEPPER AND MUSHROOMS!
BURDOCK AND BARLEY!
LAH LA LA LAH!
THE SEVEN SPRING FLOWERS, AND BELS!
CUCUMBER, SWEET CORN!
LAH LA LA LAH!


THE NAKASENDŌ BYWAY THROUGH JAPAN TO THE KISO TRAIL. PAST THE TWELVE KISO WAY STATIONS, AND ON TOWARD MAGOME.
BURDOCK! BARLEY!
THE SEVEN SPRING FLOWERS, AND EELS!
THE LIL' TYKE GOT GUTS, HE DOES. FOUR HOURS ON HORSEBACK AND HE DON'T CRY ONCE. LORDY, IF HE AIN'T DRIVIN' ME HALF CRAZY SINGIN' THAT SAME DANG SONG OVER AND OVER..
IS IT REALLY ALL RIGHT TO LEAVE 'IM HERE? THE DEAL WAS I BRING HIM TO THE GATES OF AZAMI NUNNERY, AND THAT'S THE END OF IT..
COULDN'T HARDLY SAY NO WHEN THAT UPSTANDIN' SAMURAI ASKED ME, COULD I? AND DIDN'T HE PAY ME A RIGHT NICE FEE FOR IT, TOO?
MISTER FIG! MISTER CARROT!
YOU FIGURE THE LITTLE FELLA'S MUM IS HERE..?

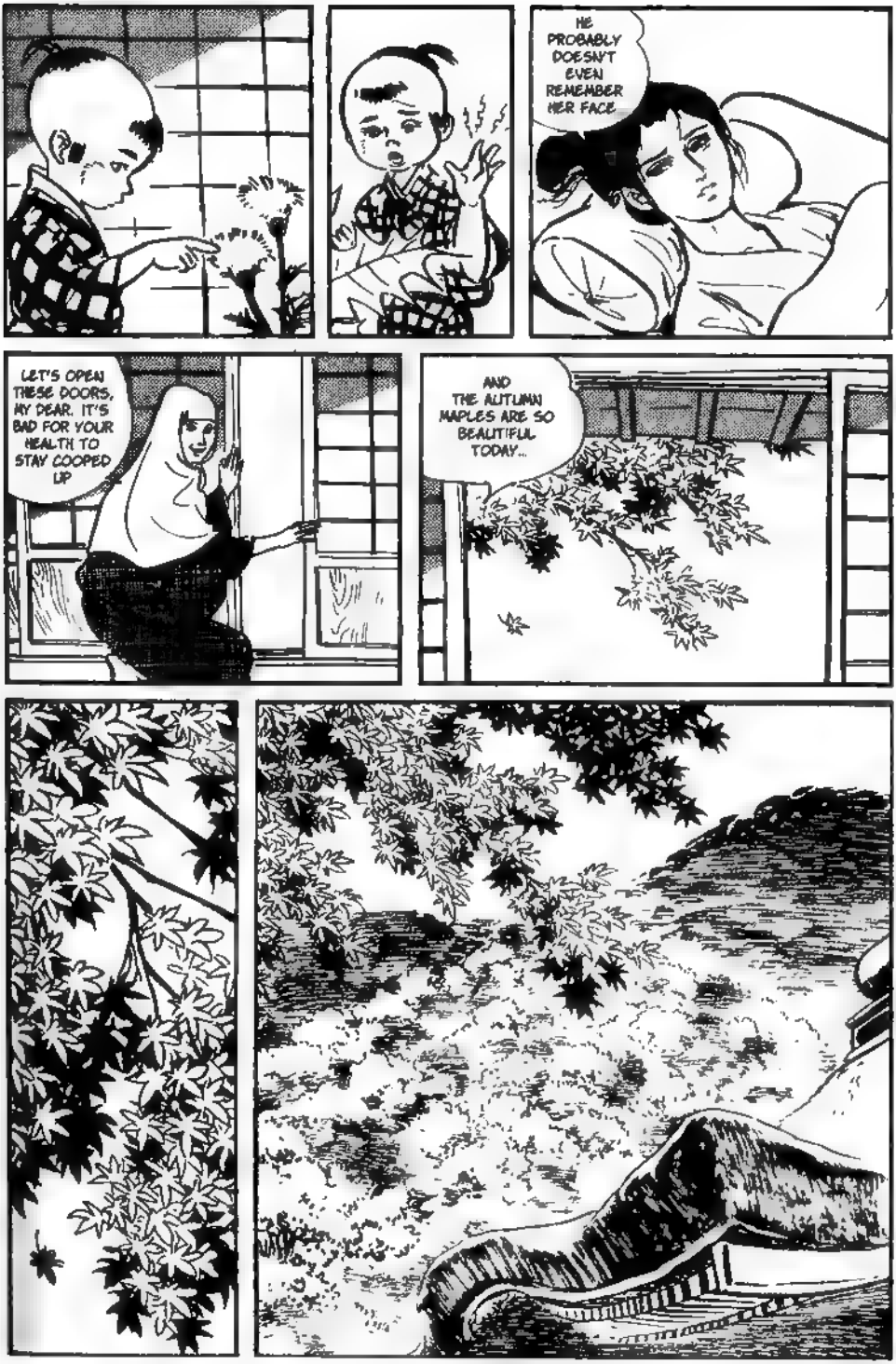
BRING 'IM HERE AND SKEDADDLE, THAT'S WHAT HE SAID AND IF YA KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YA, FORGET YOU EVER SEEN ME OR THE BOY..

SHAKIS
殺
*DEATH

GOODNESS ME, WHAT A DARLING YOUNG MAN.
FORGIVE US FOR IMPOSING ON YOUR HOSPITALITY.
TUT TUT, NONE OF THAT. IT'S MY *DUTY* TO LOOK AFTER THOSE WHO COME FOR RETREATS.

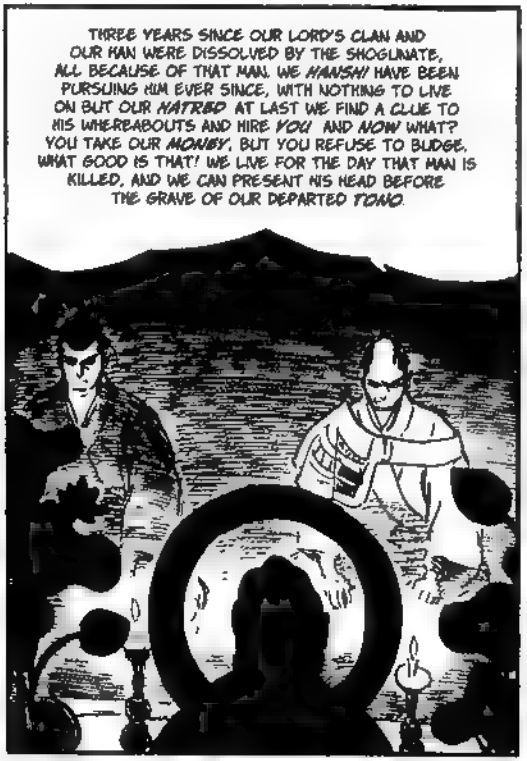

NOW LET'S GO THISAWAY, YOUNG GENTLEMAN.
YOUR FATHER CAN'T CONCENTRATE ON HIS PRAYERS WITH YOU RUNNING AROUND, MM?
UHFF... KFF...?

FFP
TUT TUT!
WE MUSTN'T DO THAT AGAIN, MM?
YOU'VE BEEN HERE TWO LONG YEARS, AND THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'VE SEEN YOU SMILE, MY DEAR.
SO CUTE.. WHO'S..?
HE'S THE CHILD OF A *RŌNIN* HERE ON RETREAT.. HE SAYS HE WISHES TO PRAY FOR THE BOY'S MOTHER THE THIRD YEAR SINCE HER DEATH..
THEN... THIS LITTLE BOY?
SO CHEERFUL FOR A CHILD WHO LOST HIS MOTHER SO YOUNG. HIS FATHER MUST HAVE RAISED HIM WELL.

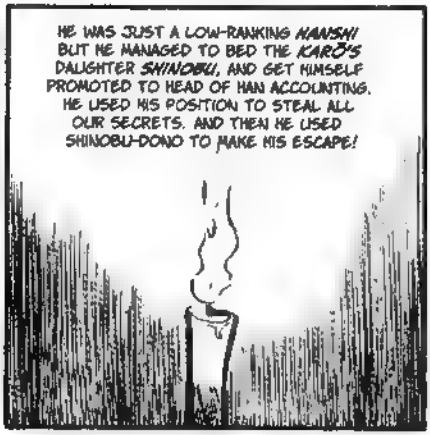

HE PROBABLY DOESN'T EVEN REMEMBER HER FACE
LET'S OPEN THESE DOORS, MY DEAR. IT'S BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH TO STAY COOPED UP
AND THE AUTUMN MAPLES ARE SO BEAUTIFUL TODAY...

THE MAPLES TURN...
AND THEN COME THE RAINS... WHEN THE AUTUMN RAINS POUR DOWN, HE'LL COME BACK TO ME.
I KNOW HE WILL. UNTIL THEN, UNTIL THAT DAY, I MUST LIVE ON.
LIVE... LIVE TO SEE HIM. EVEN FOR A MOMENT ONE LAST TIME.
HE PROMISED HE TOLD ME. WHEN THE AUTUMN RAINS FALL, I SHALL COME BACK TO YOU.
AND SO... AND SO...

I'M NOT USED TO THIS TRAVELING GEAR. I'LL BE GLAD TO BE OUT OF IT.
....
I NEVER EXPECTED YOUR REPRESENTATIVE TO BE A BABY. A WOLF CUB IS STILL A WOLF, IS THAT IT?
....
FIVE HUNDRED *RYŌ*. THAT'S A POT OF MONEY, YOU KNOW. WE HAD TO SCRAMBLE TO GET IT TOGETHER. DID YOU RECEIVE IT?
I DID.
I CAN'T FATHOM WHAT YOU'RE DOING IN THIS PLACE. DO YOU REALLY THINK A RENEGADE *O-NIWABAN* OF THE SHOGUNATE IS GOING TO COME BACK TO THE WOMAN HE USED TO MAKE HIS ESCAPE?
WE'RE THROWING EVERY RESOURCE WE HAVE INTO TRACKING HIM DOWN.
FROM THE INFORMATION WE HAVE, HE'S LEFT THE *ISA-YASHIKI* IN EDO, AND IS HEADED WEST TOWARD KYŌTO ALONG THE *TŌKAIDŌ* BYWAY. WE'VE STATIONED SPOTTERS ALONG THE ROUTE. IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE WE TRACK HIM DOWN.
AND THAT'S WHY WE WANT YOU TO HEAD FOR THE *TŌKAIDŌ*. IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS ALREADY. THERE'S NO REASON HE'D EVER COME BACK *HERE*.
....


THREE YEARS SINCE OUR LORD'S CLAN AND OUR HAN WERE DISSOLVED BY THE SHOGUNATE, ALL BECAUSE OF THAT MAN. WE HANSHI HAVE BEEN PURSUING HIM EVER SINCE, WITH NOTHING TO LIVE ON BUT OUR HATRED. AT LAST WE FIND A CLUE TO HIS WHEREABOUTS AND HIRE YOU! AND NOW WHAT? YOU TAKE OUR MONEY, BUT YOU REFUSE TO BUDGE. WHAT GOOD IS THAT! WE LIVE FOR THE DAY THAT MAN IS KILLED, AND WE CAN PRESENT HIS HEAD BEFORE THE GRAVE OF OUR DEPARTED TONO.

THE HEAD OF THAT DESPICABLE DOG!


HE WAS JUST A LOW-RANKING HANSHI BUT HE MANAGED TO BED THE KARŌ'S DAUGHTER SHINOBU, AND GET HIMSELF PROMOTED TO HEAD OF HAN ACCOUNTING. HE USED HIS POSITION TO STEAL ALL OUR SECRETS. AND THEN HE USED SHINOBU-DONO TO MAKE HIS ESCAPE!

THEY GOT THIS FAR BEFORE SHINOBU FELL ILL. SO HE JUST DUMPS HER HERE, AND FLEES TO EDO! IT WAS ALL PART OF HIS PLAN FROM THE BEGINNING! SEDUCING SHINOBU, USING HER TO MAKE HIS ESCAPE...

WE DIDN'T KNOW UNTIL TOO LATE THAT HE WAS REALLY ONE OF THE SHOGUN'S SATOIRI NINJA. HIS FIGHTING SKILLS ARE TOO MUCH FOR US TO TAKE HIM ON ALONE...
YET HERE YOU SIT, TWIDDLING YOUR THUMBS!

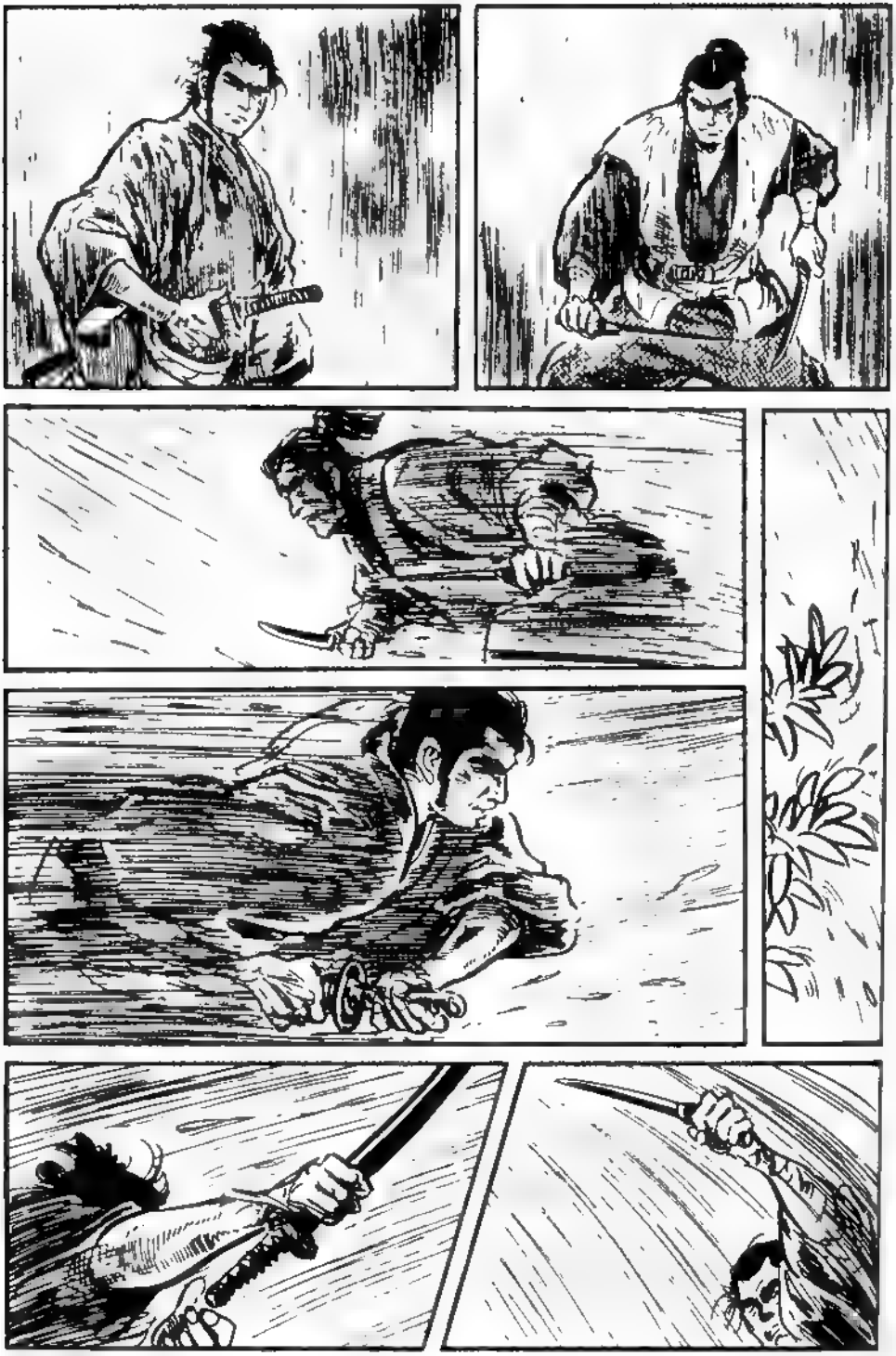
THE MAN STAYED HERE FOR SEVERAL DAYS TO TAKE CARE OF HIS ALOUS WIFE.
DOESN'T THAT SEEM A LONG TIME FOR A MAN WHO HAD ALREADY COMPLETED HIS MISSION?
ARE YOU SUGGESTING HE LOVED HER?!
ABSURD! YOU DON'T KNOW OF WHAT YOU SPEAK!

I HAVE NEVER ONCE FAILED A MISSION. IF YOU DON'T TRUST ME, HIRE SOMEONE ELSE
NOW LEAVE! OR ELSE!
I.. I UNDERSTAND DO IT YOUR WAY..
THE RAINS..?
THE- THE RAINS..

FFD

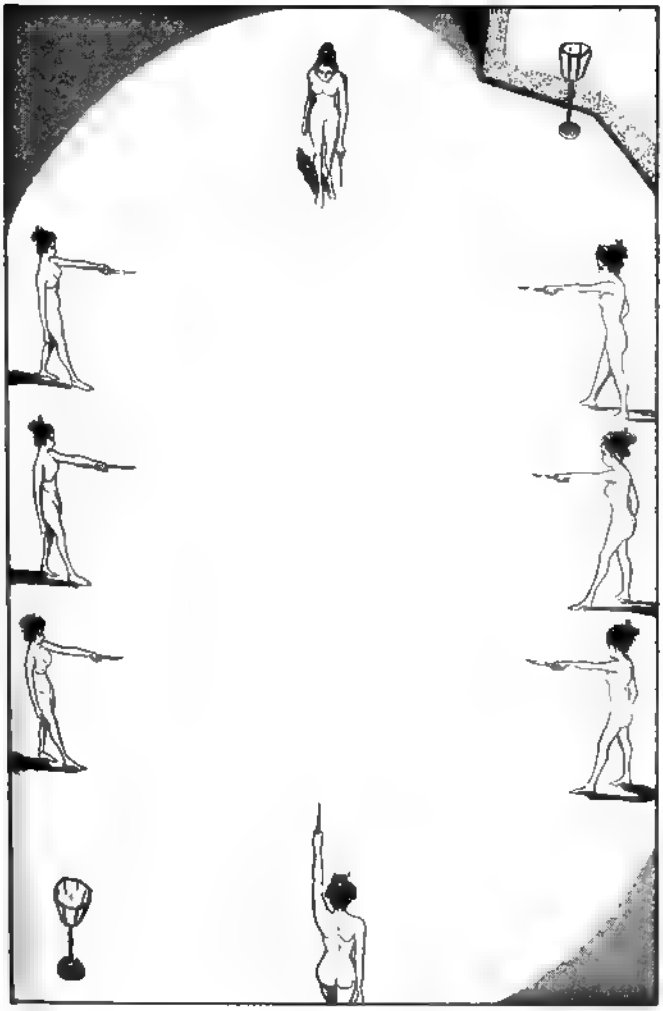
HAH?!
SHINOBU! SHINOBU, IT'S ME! SPEAK TO ME!
AH..!

SHINOBU!
SHINOBU!
NO
NO, NO,
NO-OH...



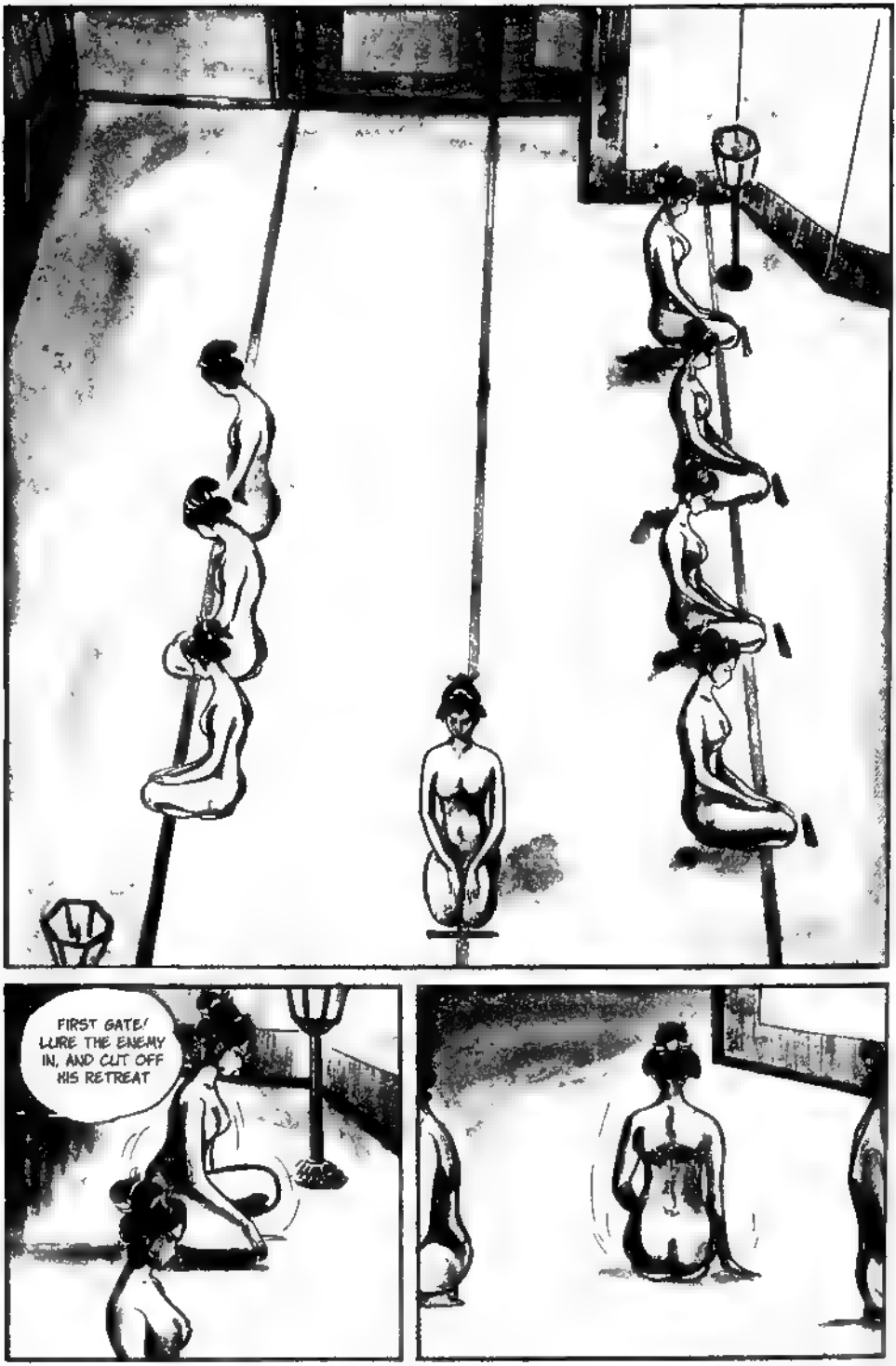
KRAKK

SHI...
NO...
BU...

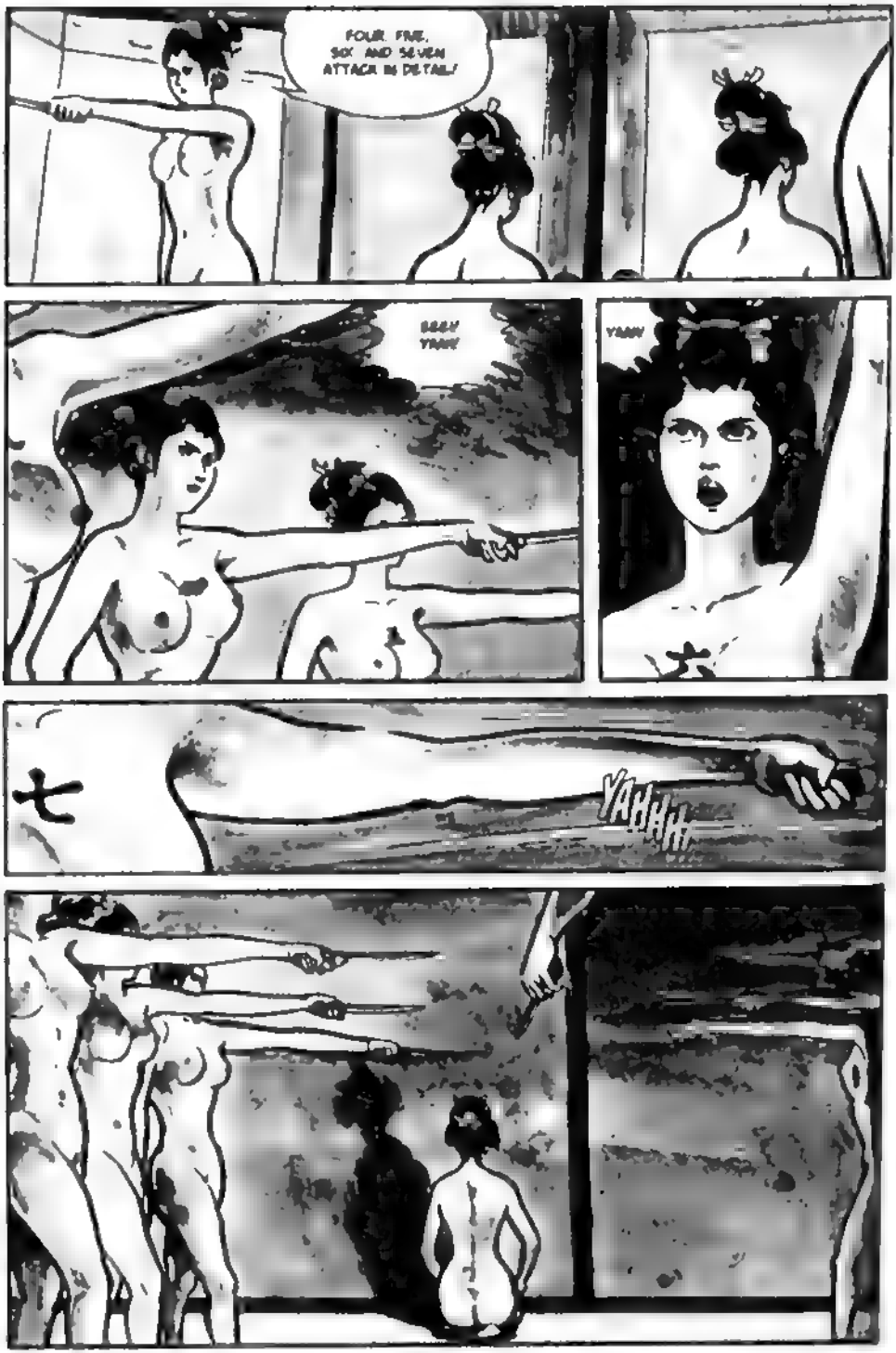


the seventh

Eight Gates of Deceit


FIRST GATE/ LURE THE ENEMY IN, AND CUT OFF HIS RETREAT

AT THAT INSTANT, THE SECOND GATE ATTACKS!
YAH!
WHSS
*TWO
*TWO
THREE ATTACKS!
EEU!
THE FIRST PURSUES!
EIIII!
*ONE


FOUR, FIVE, SIX AND SEVEN ATTACK IN DETAIL!
YAAH YAAH
YAAH
七
YAHHH!

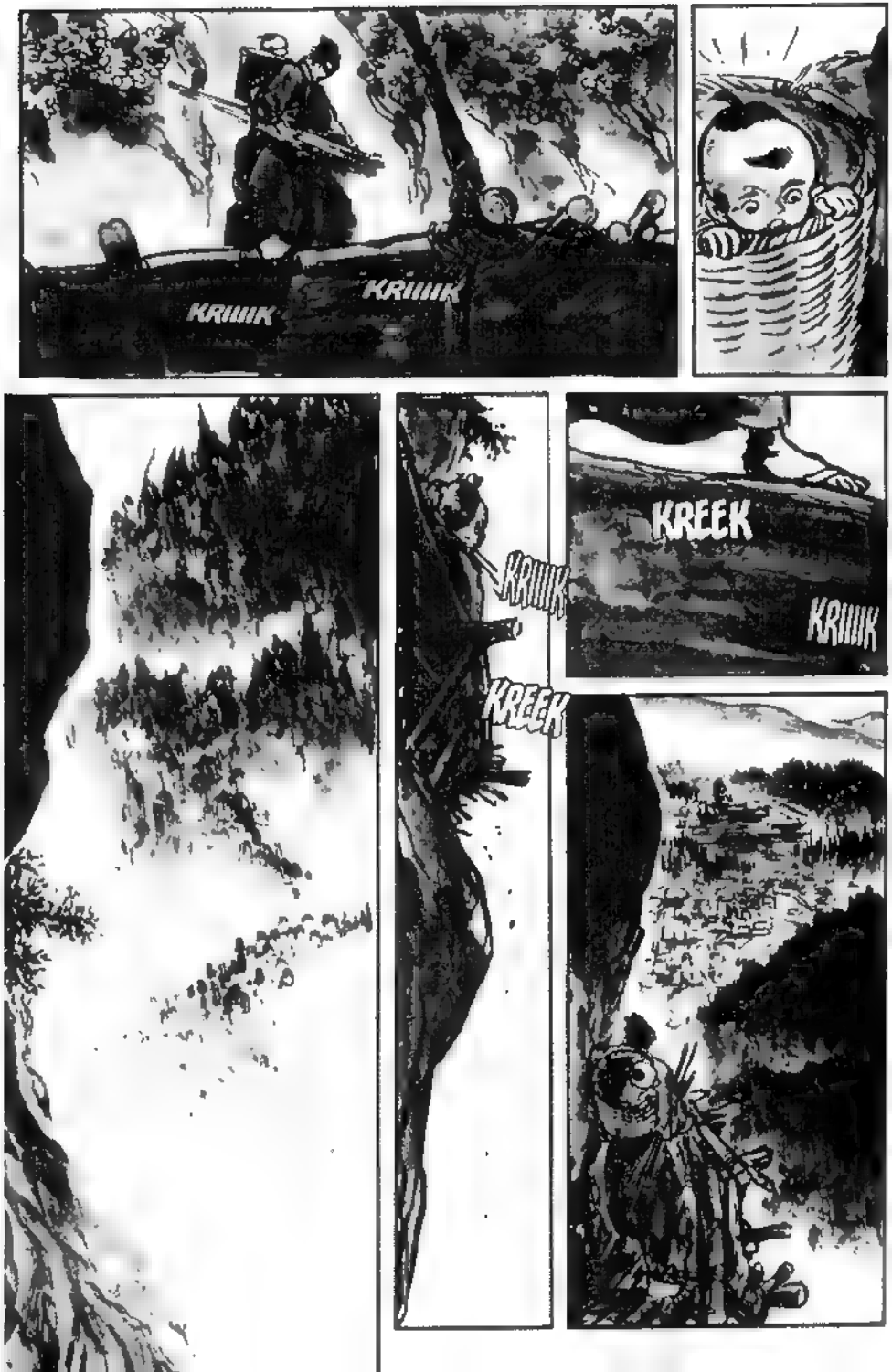
THE WARRIOR'S ONLY PATH OF ESCAPE IS THE EIGHTH GATE
DRIVEN AND FATIGUED, HE REACHES THIS EIGHTH GATE
THE PERFECT SUBWAY TO END HIS LIFE!
AH!
THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN DELAY YOUR PURSUIT BY SMASHING IT
DO YOU UNDERSTAND FOOL ARE THE HUNTERS INVINCIBLE EVEN BEFORE YOU
THE EIGHT GATES OF DECEIT DEFENSE! MACHIAVON TOMATO AND JIMY FORGET IT NOT!

GARA
GARA

GARA
GARA

HOH..!

A NARROW SUSPENSION BRIDGE.
WE MUST BE PREPARED TO FIGHT HERE, BE IT A QUICK ASSAULT OR THE FINAL BATTLE
HM...
WHEEE! WHEEE!
DON'T ROCK THE BASKET, DAIGORO


KRIIIIK
KRIIIIK
KRIIIIK
KREEK
KREEK
KRIIIIK

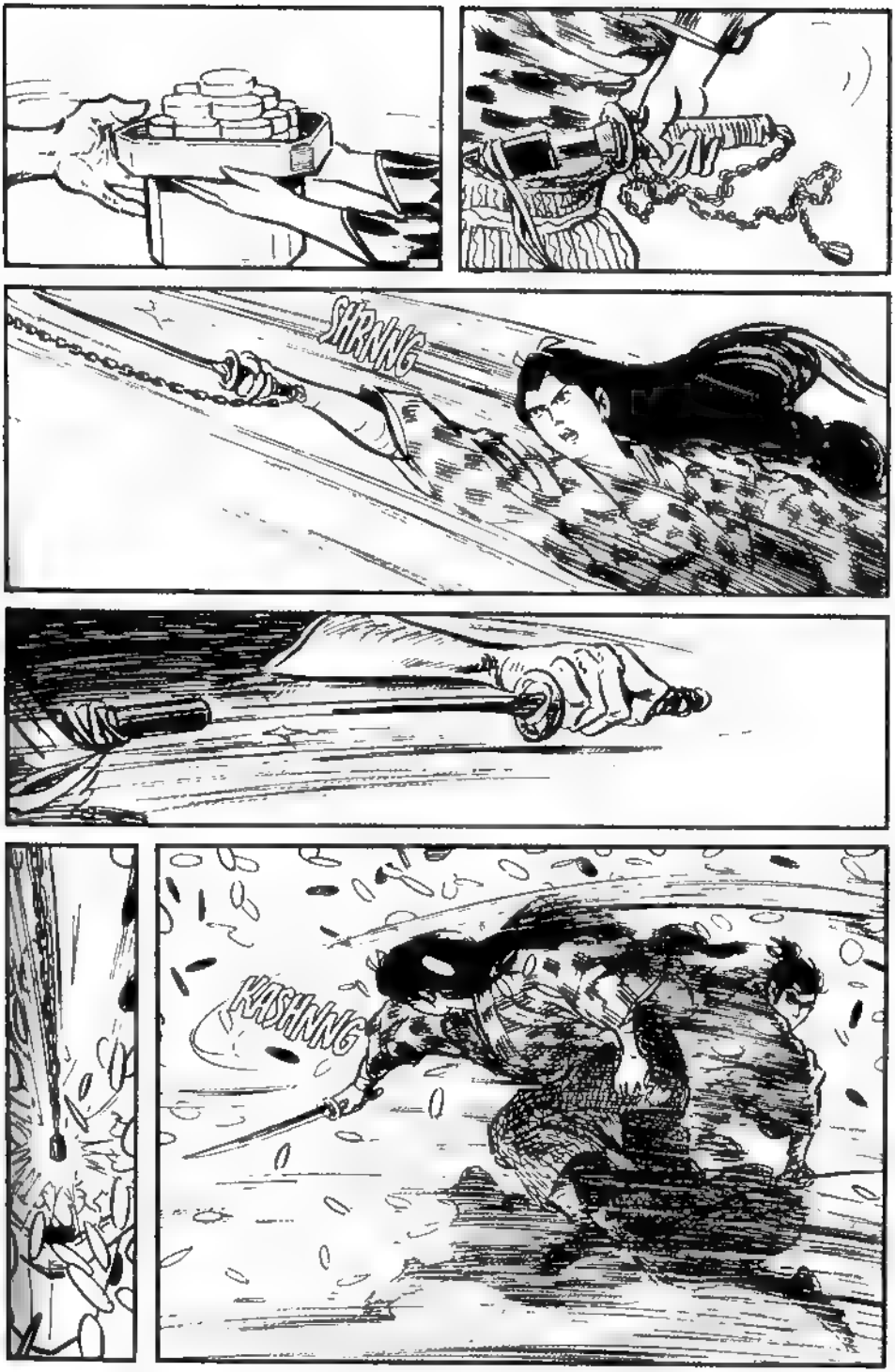
KREEE
KLICNK
*KUROBE KAN
MOUNTAIN GATE
SKREE

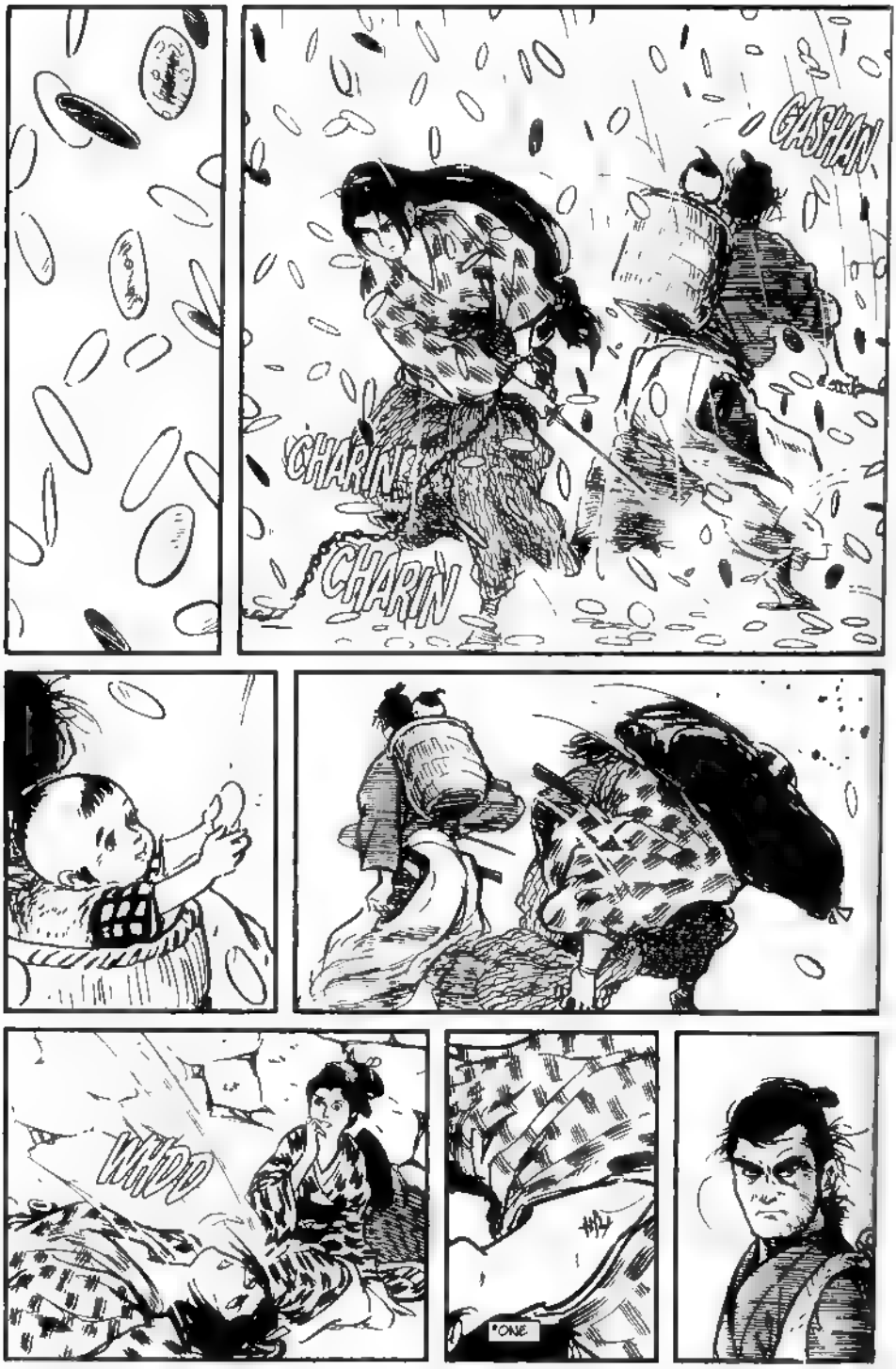
*KUROBE HAN NINTH GATE
....
A PEASANT REVOLT...?

SNIFF
SNIFF

GRRRR
WE HAVE BEEN AWAITING YOUR ARRIVAL. I COME REPRESENTING OUR CASTLE KARŌ, SAWATARI GENBA.
ARE YOU TRULY THE ONE KNOWN AS LONE WOLF AND CUB?
IT SEEMS SOME CALL US THAT.

LAST NIGHT OUR PEASANTRY ROSE UP IN ARMS. WE HAVE CRUSHED THEM.
THE MAN WE COMMISSIONED YOU TO TERMINATE, OGORI KIZAEMON, THE ELDER OF THE SIXTEEN VILLAGES OF KUROBE HAN AND INSTIGATOR OF THE REVOLT, IS DEAD.
....
FORTUNATELY OUR HAN LIES IN THIS VALLEY, BOUNDED BY MOUNTAINS ON EVERY SIDE. WORD OF THE REVOLT HAS NOT ESCAPED OUR BORDERS. THE CORPSES ARE DISPOSED OF, AND RECONSTRUCTION WORK HAS ALREADY BEGUN.
....
WE NO LONGER HAVE NEED OF YOUR SERVICES. RETURN FROM WHENCE YOU CAME. IT IS BUT A PITTANCE FOR YOUR TROUBLES, YET WE HAVE PREPARED FOR YOU HALF OF YOUR ACCUSTOMED FEE, TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY RYŪ.
YOU HUNGER FOR BLOOD.
HOH HOH HOH! FORGIVE ME! LAST NIGHT I KILLED TOO MANY OF THOSE PEASANT DOGS. THE STENCH OF BLOOD AND DEATH MUST CLING TO MY BODY STILL.
YOU ARE A *BETSUSHIKIME*? A WOMAN WARRIOR?
INDEED. I AM A *BETSUSHIKIME* IN THE SERVICE OF OUR HAN. I AM BOTH CAPTAIN OF THE WATCH AND HAN MARTIAL ARTS INSTRUCTOR. AND NOW, GOOD SIR. RECEIVE THIS SMALL TOKEN.

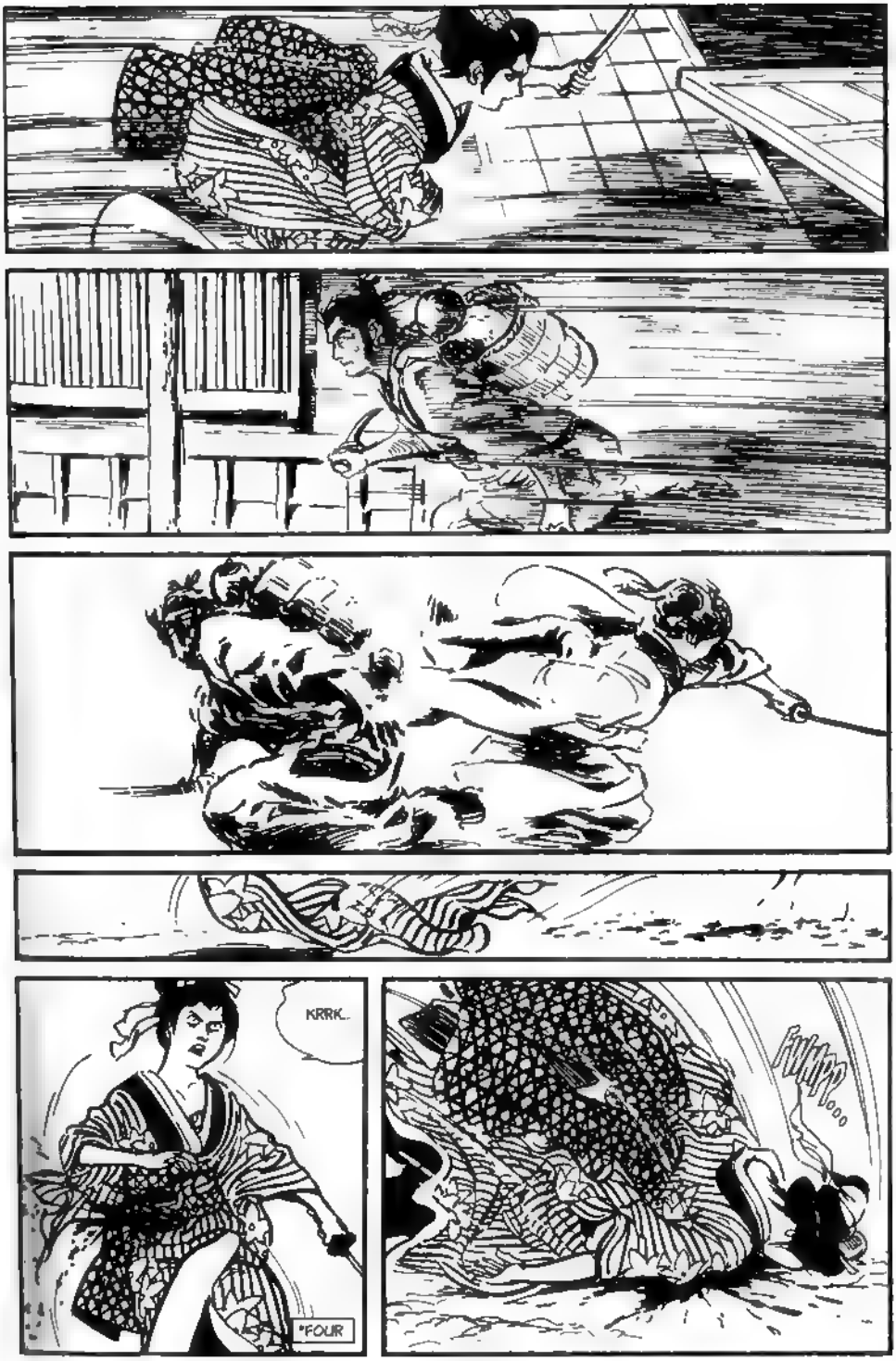

SHRNNG
KASHNNG

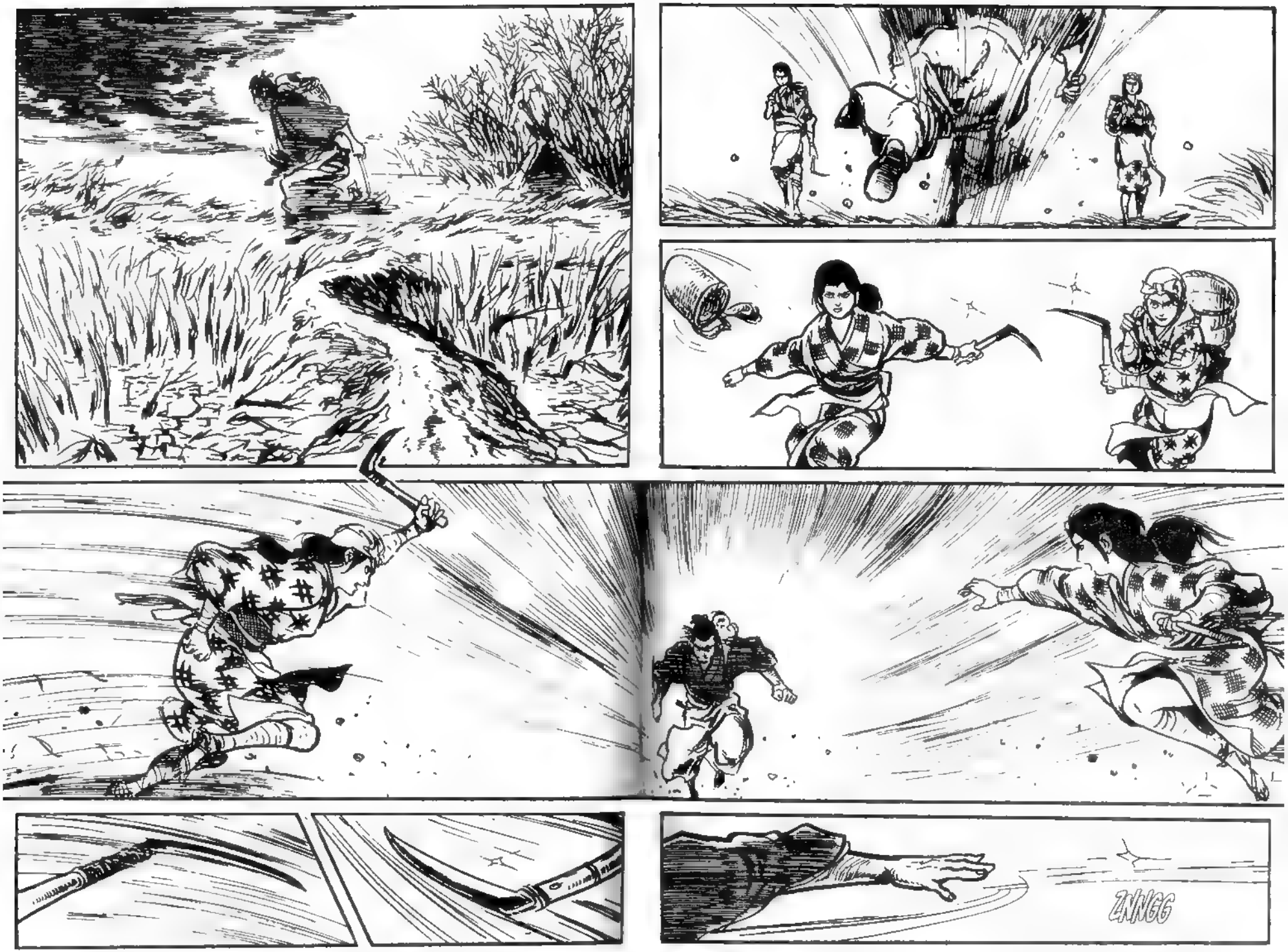

GASHAN
CHARIN
CHARIN
WHOO
*ONE

SILENCE THE ASSASSIN TO KEEP NEWS OF A REVOLT FROM REACHING EDO? THAT'S ONLY TO BE EXPECTED YET WHY DOESN'T THE CASTLE GUARD ATTACK?
DAIGORO! HOLD TIGHT TO YOUR FATHER, UNDERSTAND?!
MM!

SKUSSH
KRICHH

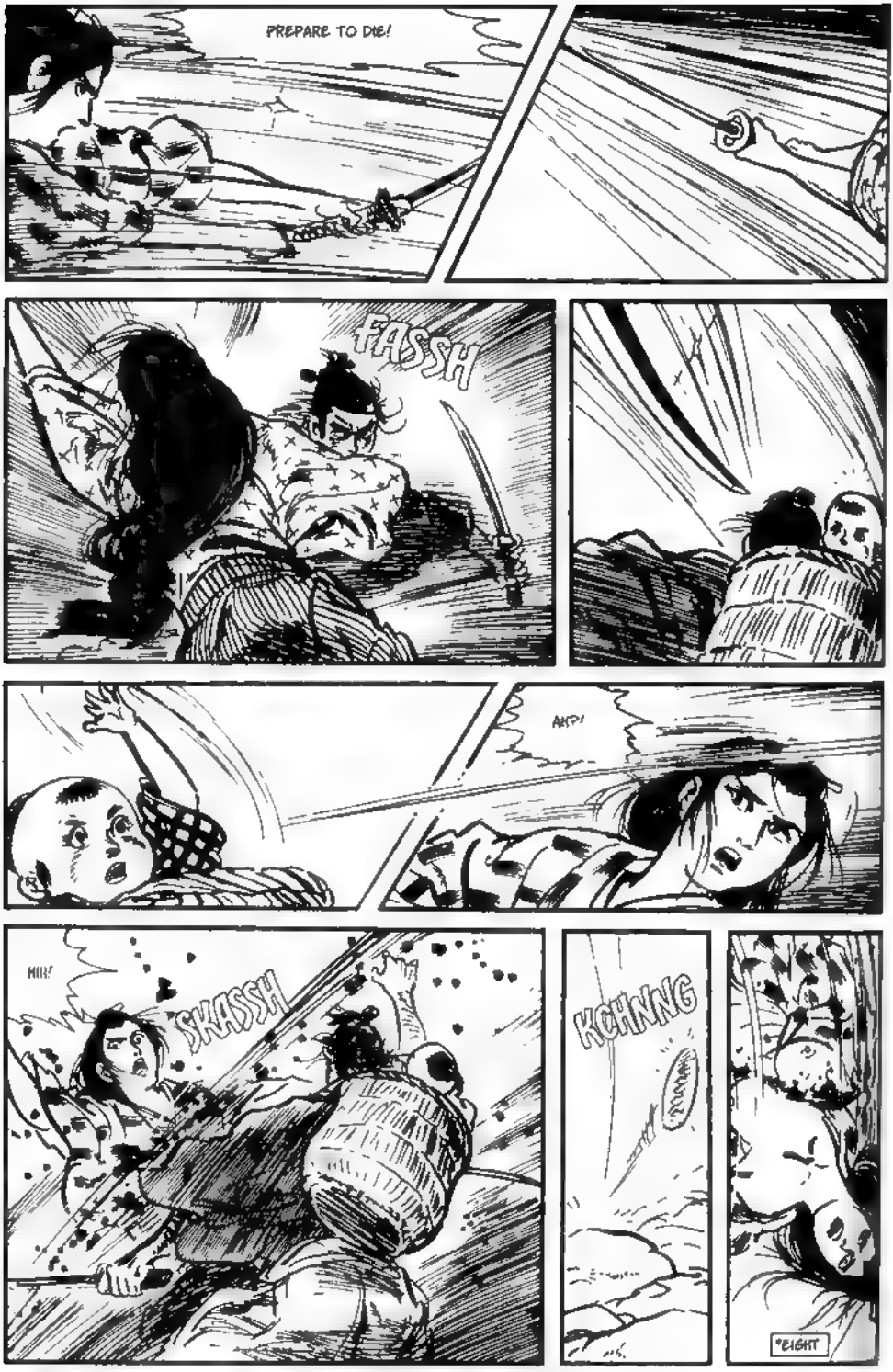
CHOKKU
URNGG..
GNG..
#TWO
#THREE
THDD

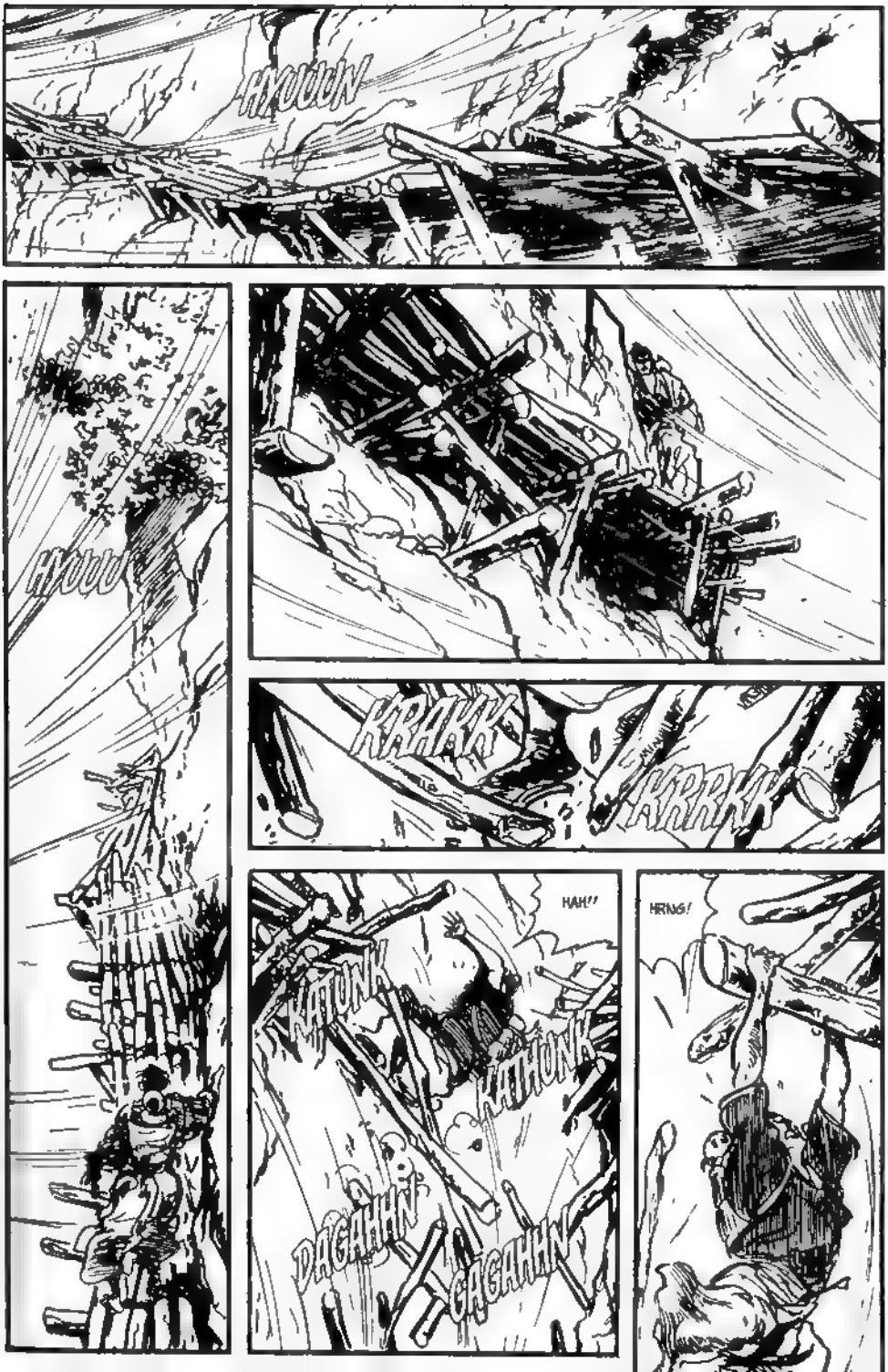

KRRK..
*FOUR
Ooo


ZNNGG

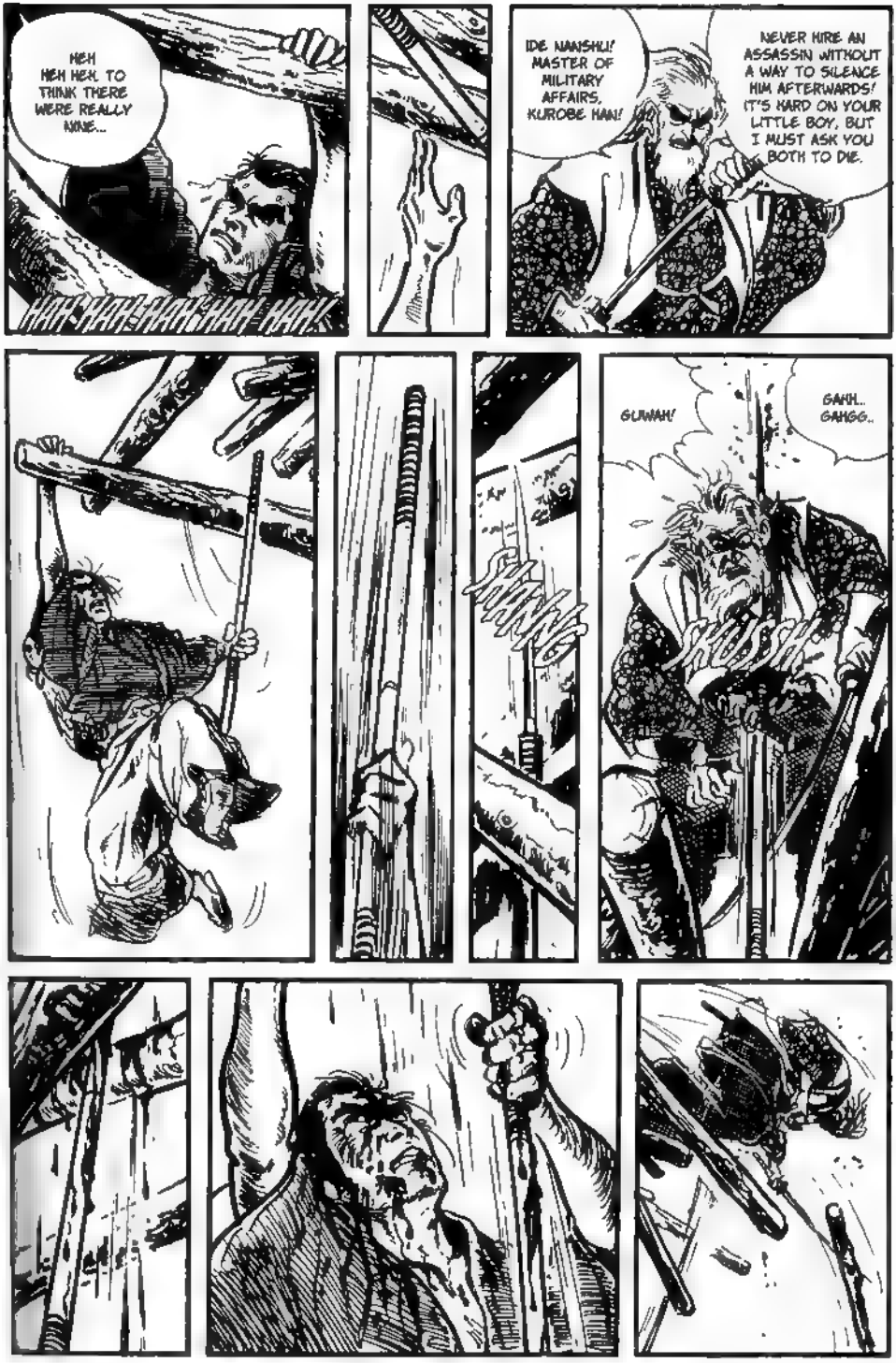
WHSH
CHOK
SKASSH
URNNGG AS AS STRONG AS EXPECTED, AND MORE LONE WOLF AND CUB BUT BUT YOU CANNOT ESCAPE OUR EIGHT GATES OF DECEIT NOT EVEN... YOU.. HEH HEH
EIGHT GATES... HACHIMON TONKŌ?!
HEH HEH HEH... THE HACHIMON TONKŌ OF THE EIGHT BATSUSHIKIMI OF KUROBE HAN. YOU WILL... NEVER...
STATION YOUR TROOPS IN EIGHT AMBUSH POINTS, SCATTER AND HARASS YOUR ENEMY TO DIVIDE AND EXHAUST HIS FORCES, AND THEN AT LAST... DELIVER THE FATAL BLOW... HACHIMON TONKŌ FROM THE TEACHINGS OF KONGMING'S BOOK OF TACTICS...?

WHICH MEANS, TWO MORE TO GO...
THE MOST DANGEROUS BETSUSHIKIMS OF ALL.
FOR YOU TO HAVE COME THIS FAR MUST MEAN.
YOU ARE NOW THE MURDERER OF OUR SISTER WARRIORS!


PREPARE TO DIE!
FASSH
AH?!
HIII!
SKASSH
KCHNNG
*EIGHT


HYOOOON
HYOOOON
KRAAK
KRRRK
KATONK
KATHONK
DAGAHHN
GAGAHHN
HAH!!
HRNG!

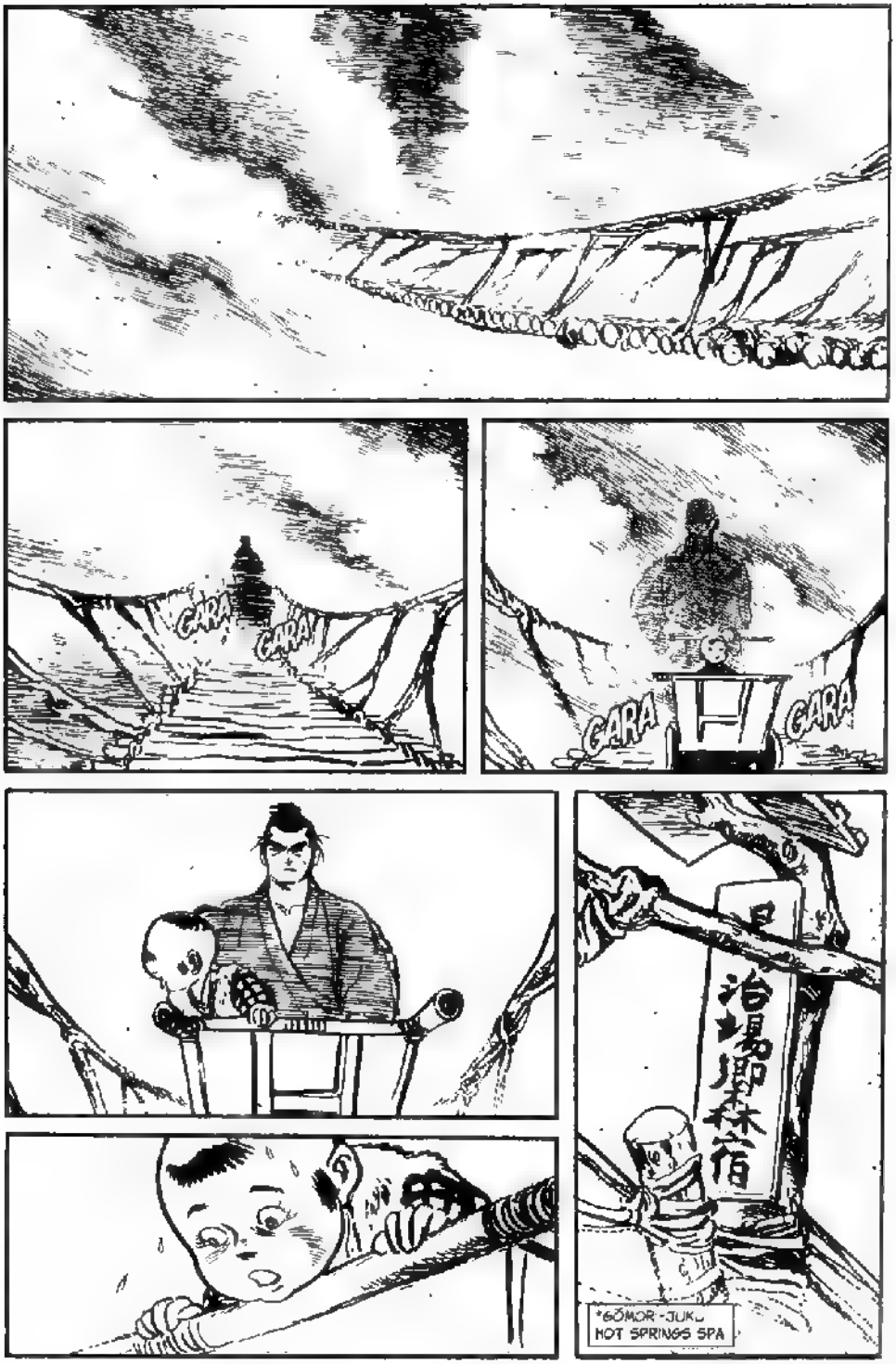
DAIGORO! DON'T LOOSEN YOUR GRIP!
MM!
KREEK KRUNK
CARELESS, LONE WOLF! CARELESS! HEH HEH HEH.
THE HACHIMON TONKŌ DEFENSE? STUFF AND NONSENSE! OUR REAL STRATEGY WAS TO DEPRIVE YOU OF THE USE OF THAT DEADLY SWORD ARM OF YOURS. OF COURSE I KNEW OUR BETSUSHIKIMI DIDN'T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST YOU...
HEH HEH HEH. I WANTED YOU TO CLEAR THOSE EIGHT FAMOUS GATES. AND WHEN YOU HAD, TO LET DOWN YOUR GUARD! THAT WAS THE MOMENT I WAITED FOR.


HEH HEH HEH. TO THINK THERE WERE REALLY NINE...
HAH-HAH-HAH-HAH-HAH!
IDE NAOSHI! MASTER OF MILITARY AFFAIRS, KUROBE HAN!
NEVER HIRE AN ASSASSIN WITHOUT A WAY TO SILENCE HIM AFTERWARDS! IT'S HARD ON YOUR LITTLE BOY, BUT I MUST ASK YOU BOTH TO DIE.
GUWAH!
GAHH.. GAHGG..
KUSH

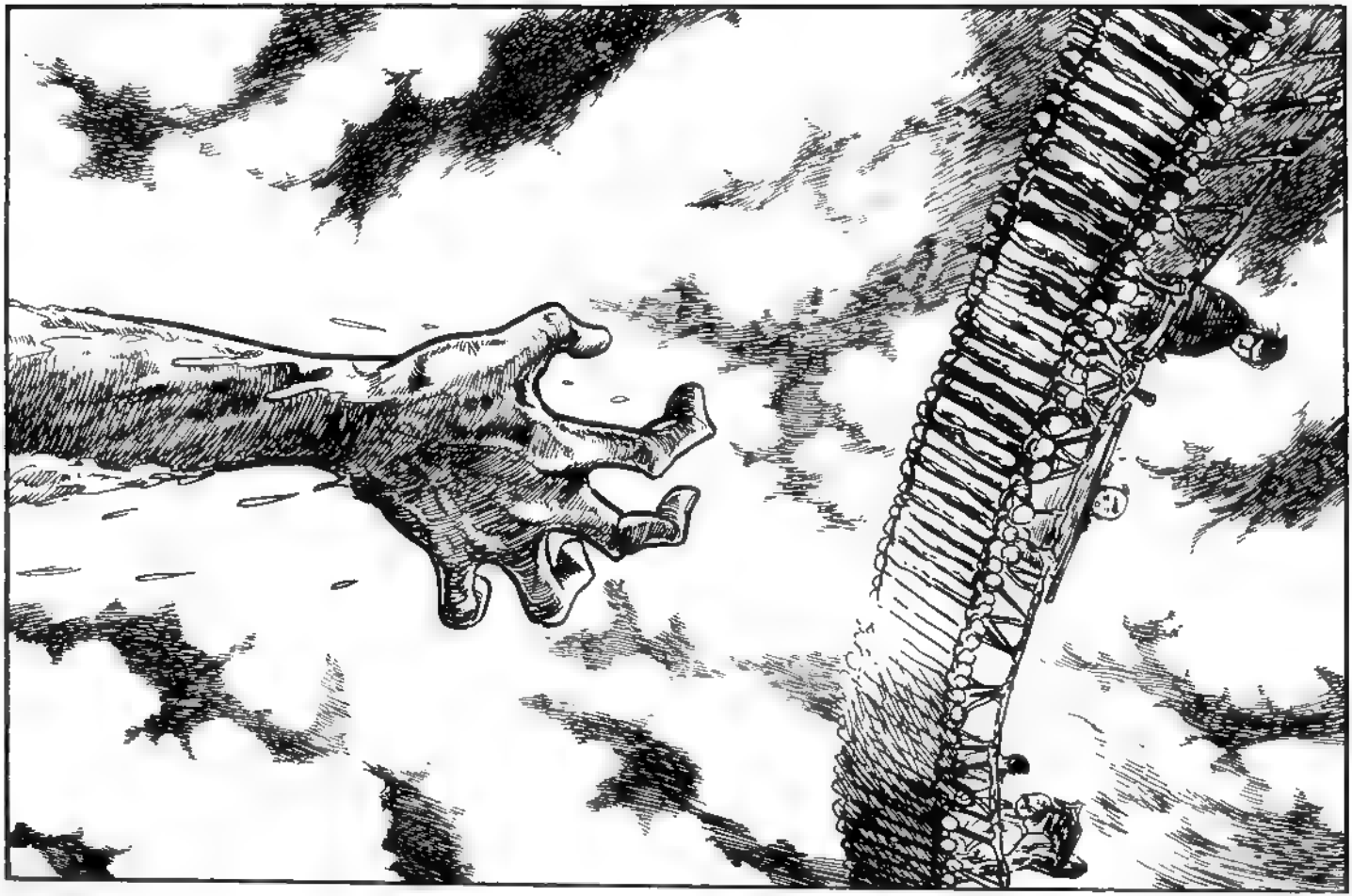
YOU WERE THE CARELESS ONE, WANSHU-DONO
ESPECIALLY ON THE FINAL BRIDGE...
DID YOU FORGET THE OLD SAYING? READY YOUR STAFF *BEFORE* YOU FALL...

the eighth

Wings to the Bird, Fangs to the Beast

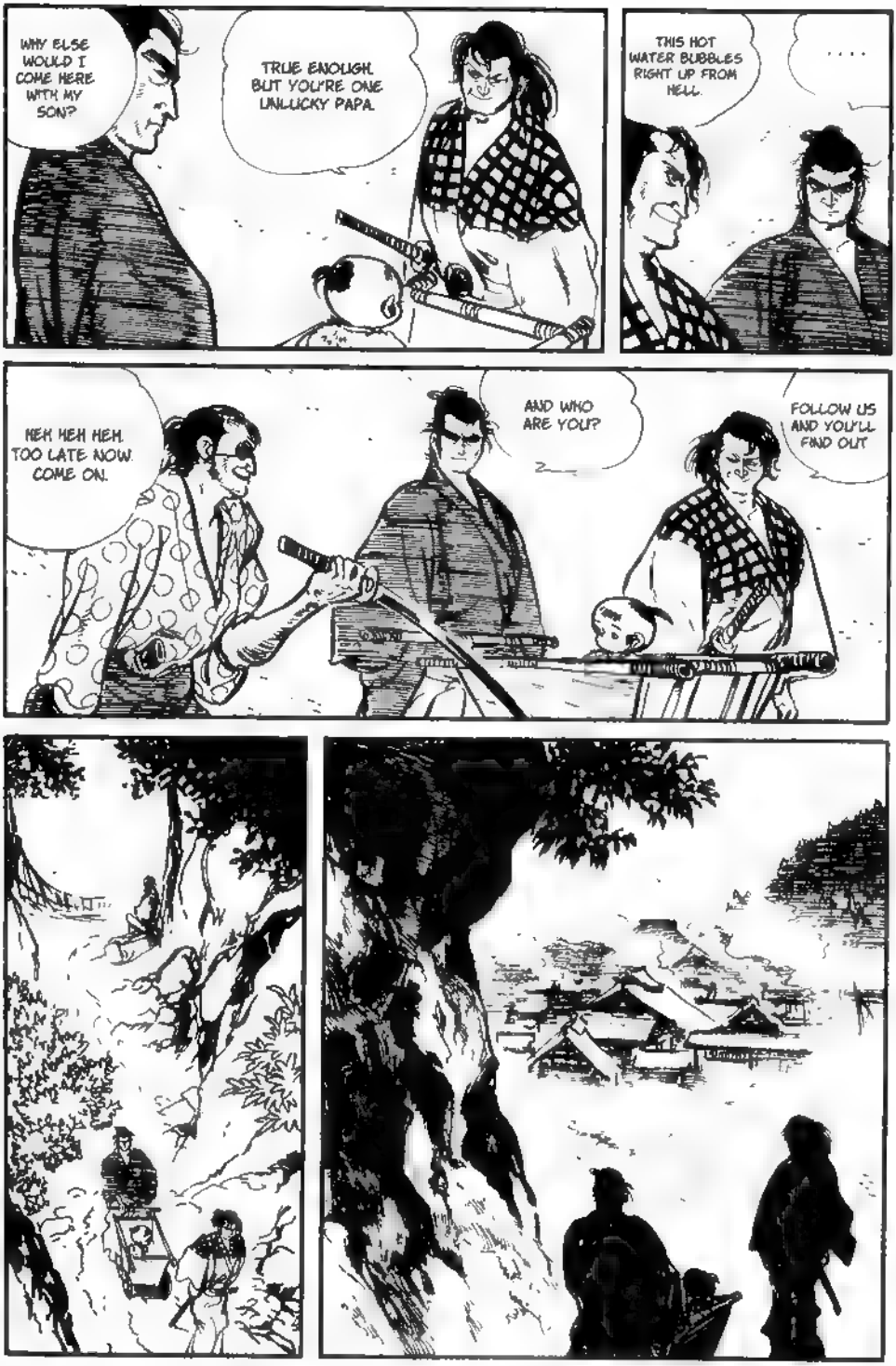

GARA
GARA
GARA
GARA
*GOMOR-JUKU
HOT SPRINGS SPA

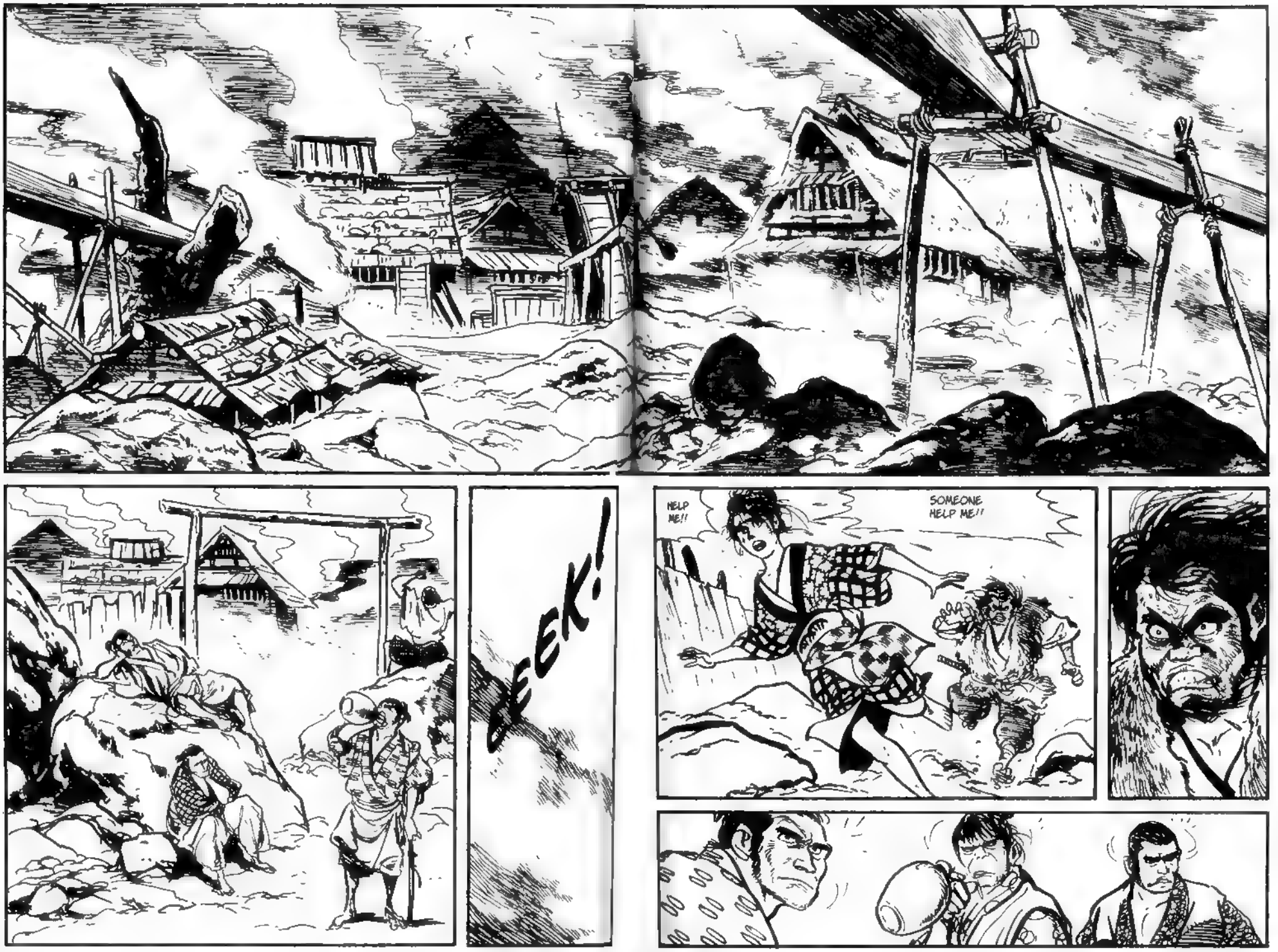
NGAH
KKRK
DA.. DAMN BASTARDS..
WAH!
AHHHG..
SPLASH!



*GŌMORI-JUKU
HEH HEH HEH..
TAKE THAT, PAL...
HOH..!
THIS IS THE ONLY WAY IN AND OUT OF GŌMORI JUKU.
IF YOU CUT DOWN THE BRIDGE, PERHAPS YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS MIGHT FIND IT HARD TO LEAVE..
HE'S A WISE GUY
HEY! YOU WITH THE BRAT!
THINK I SHOULD CHOP OFF THIS DAMN ROPE AND SEND YOU ALL AFTER HIM?
HELL. COME ON OVER

NYA HAH HAH..
WHOA! A DŌTANUKI!
CUTS RIGHT THROUGH BONE WITHOUT GETTING NOTCHED, PERFECT SIZE TO USE ON HORSEBACK THE ULTIMATE COMBAT SWORD
NICE TOY YOU GOT HERE THINK I'LL JUST HOLD ON TO IT HEH HEH HEH.
SWIKK
WHAT'RE YA HERE FOR?
MIGHT NOT A TRAVELER GO OUT OF HIS WAY TO REACH A TOWN WITH LODGINGS, ESPECIALLY IF IT'S A HOT SPRINGS SPA?
YOU'RE REALLY HERE FOR THE WATERS?


WHY ELSE WOULD I COME HERE WITH MY SON?
TRUE ENOUGH. BUT YOU'RE ONE UNLUCKY PAPA.
THIS HOT WATER BUBBLES RIGHT UP FROM HELL.
....
HEH HEH HEH. TOO LATE NOW. COME ON.
AND WHO ARE YOU?
FOLLOW US AND YOU'LL FIND OUT


EEEK!
HELP ME!!
SOMEONE HELP ME!!

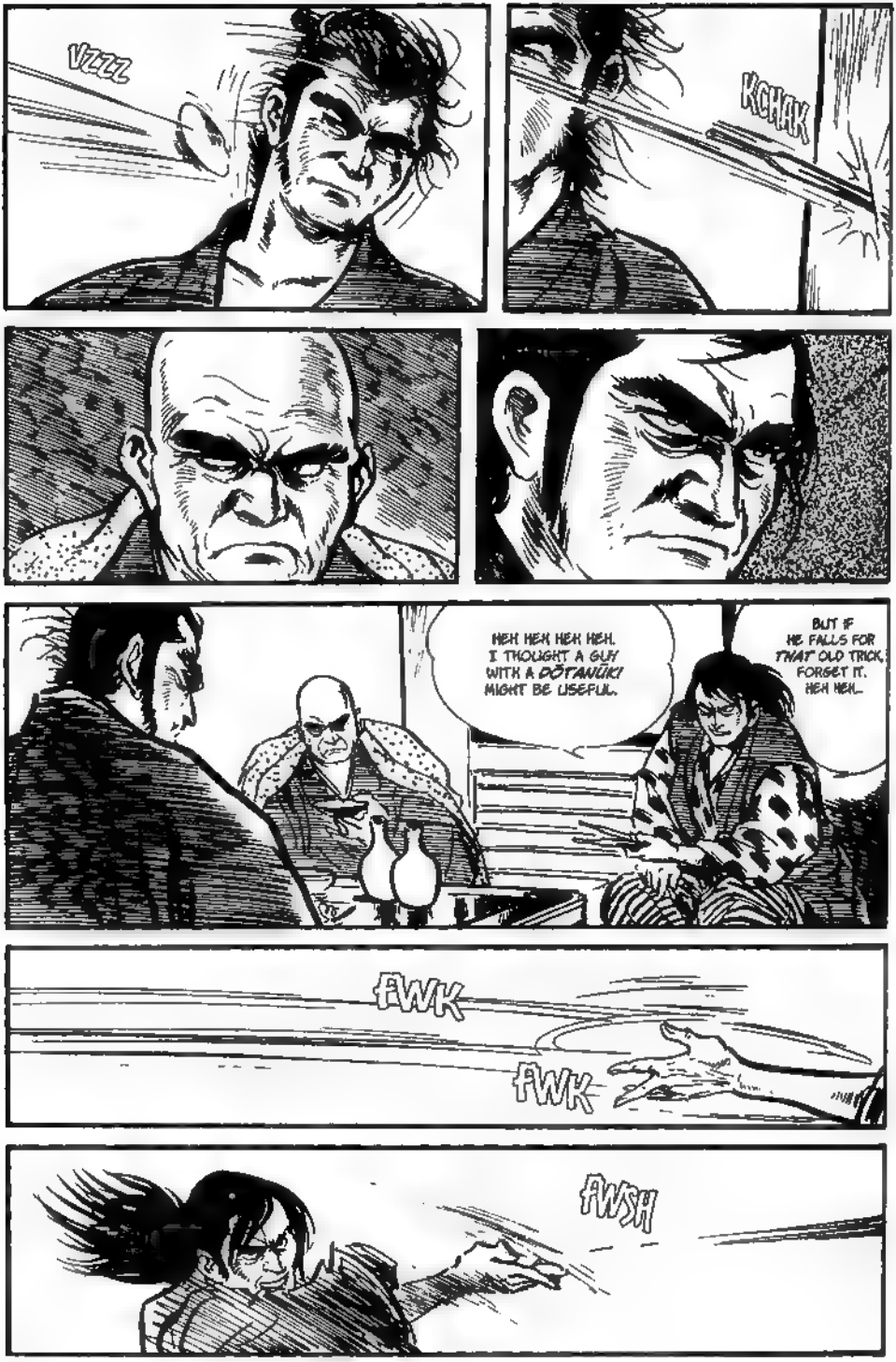
THANK GOD!
HEL.. HELP..
RIPP
HIIIK!
RRP
RRP
KYAAK!
GEHFUFFU!
NO-OH!!
WHDD

HIII!
HEH HEH HEH. NO SIGHT FOR A LITTLE KID, EH? YOU'RE A GOOD DADDY, YOU ARE.
GYAAHH!
HEH HEH HEH
EEH HEE HEE
HEH HEH
S - STOP! PLEASE STOP!!
LEAVE HER BE!
OKAYO!!

YOU BASTARD!!!
YAHHH!!
SHRRNG
GEHH
SHUNK
GUHFF!

GRKGRKGRK... MO... MONSTERS... KRK..
GKK.
HUH. WHAT A LOSER.
CROAKED ALREADY
HEE HEE..
NOT BAD..
AHUP
DEAD AND GONE, MAN... HELL, WHAT DO YOU EXPECT? THE WAY YOU CHOKE 'EM, ANY GIRL'D GIVE UP THE GHOST
DAMN! DIDN'T GET MY TURN.
PISSES ME OFF
GARR
GARR

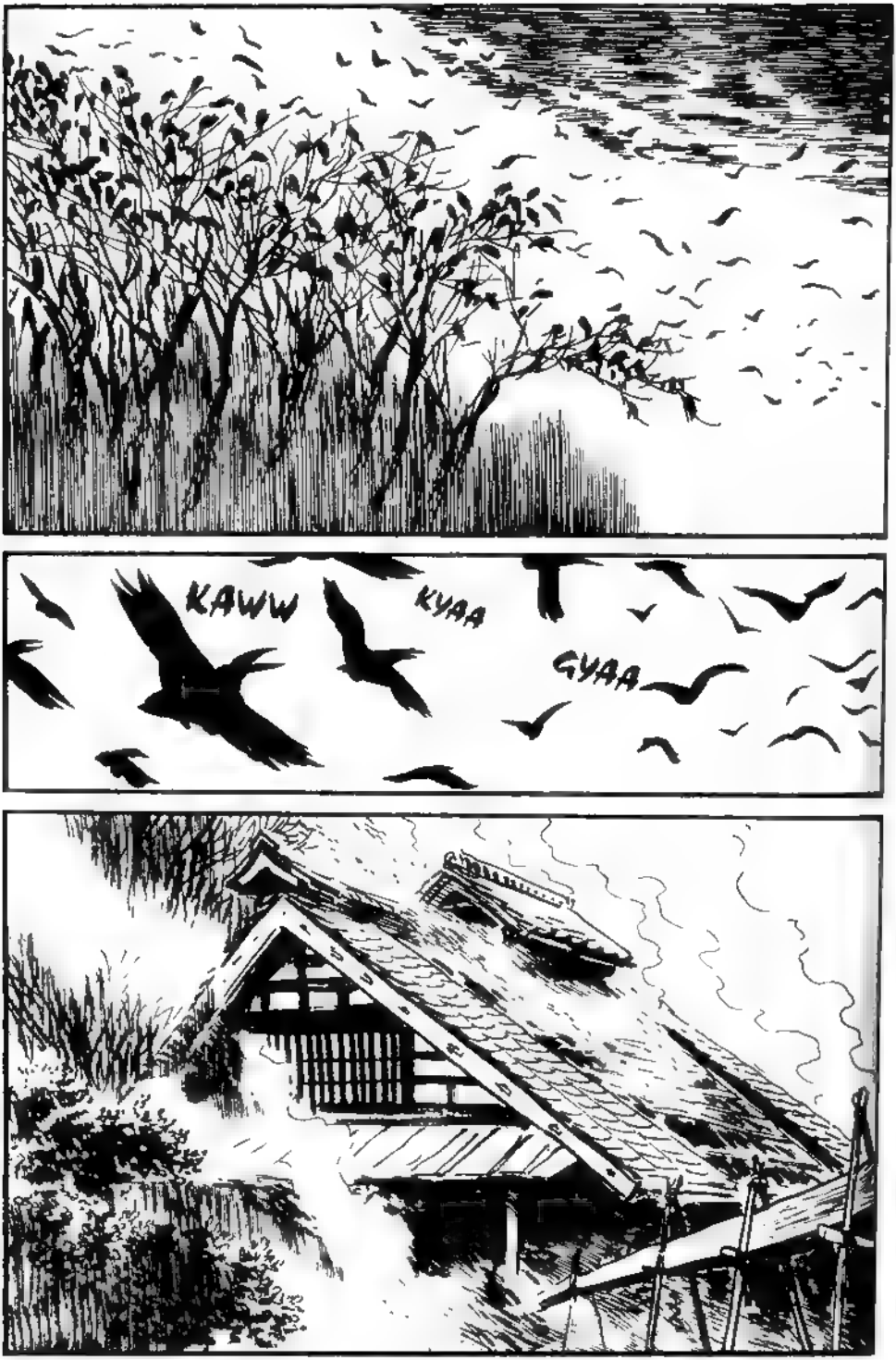
WE'VE MET BEFORE, PERHAPS...?
.....
NO.
HMM.. MY MISTAKE, THEN...? IT FEELS LIKE I'VE SEEN YOU SOMEWHERE...
WHIZZ


VZZZ
KCHAK
HEH HEH HEH HEH. I THOUGHT A GUY WITH A DŌTANUKI MIGHT BE USEFUL.
BUT IF HE FALLS FOR THAT OLD TRICK, FORGET IT. HEH HEH..
FWK
FWK
FWSH

THKK
THKK
THOK
GET IT?! LIFT ONE FINGER... AND I'LL PUT MY THROWING KNIVES THROUGH YOU AND YOUR LITTLE BRAT'S THROATS, UNDERSTAND?!
TAKE HIM TO THE BATH HOUSE!
YESSIR!
HE'S GOOD.
WH-WHADDYA SAY?!
BUT NO MATTER HOW STRONG HE IS, HE'S A PRISONER OF HIS OWN CHILD.
AND NOT FOOL ENOUGH TO TAKE ON THIS MANY MEN..
GRR...

MONNOSUKE! FORGET IT!
IF HE'S AS GOOD AS SHIGARAMI SAYS HE IS..
THEN THAT MEANS HE WAS RIDICULING MY THROWING KNIVES!!
I'LL PROVE WHETHER THE BASTARD'S ANY GOOD OR NOT!
SHIT!!
HMMM...
THAT MAN... I REMEMBER HIM FROM SOMEWHERE..

HEH HEH HEH.. CAN'T GUARANTEE YOU'LL BE ALIVE TOMORROW, BUT YOU SHOULD BEHAVE YOURSELF AS LONG AS YOU'RE IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING.
. . .
YOU MUSTA FIGURED OUT BY NOW THAT WE'RE *TOBBICHO*
AND WHAT'LL HAPPEN TO YOU IF YOU RESIST..

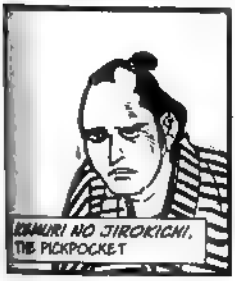

KAWW
KYAA
GYAA

IN THE BATH HOUSE, THERE WERE SEVEN OTHER HOT SPRING GUESTS
SSHAK

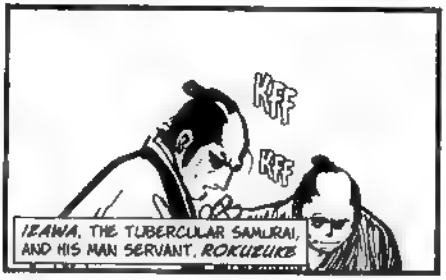
OHMA NO GENJI, THE YAKUZA

KUSHIMAKI O-SEN, THE PROSTITUTE AND CASUAL THIEF

SHŌYOBI, THE STRAIT-LACED MERCHANT


KUMURI NO JIROKICHI, THE PICKPOCKET

TEKKAN, THE WANDERING MONK


KEFF
KEFF
IEAWA, THE TUBERCULAR SAMURAI, AND HIS MAN SERVANT, ROKUZUKE

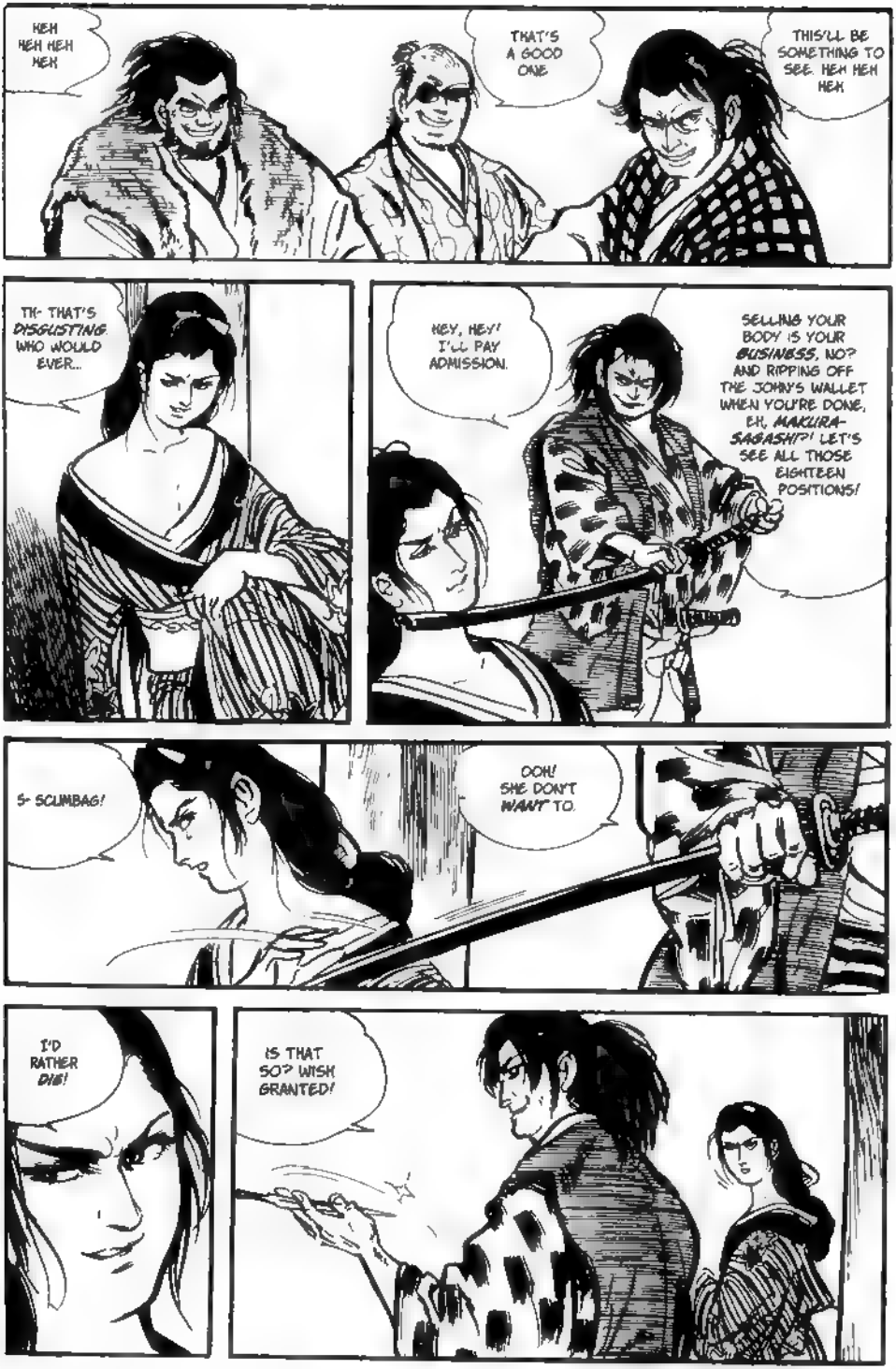
HELLO? MISTER..

KATOOK
CHAK!!
STEP OUTSIDE!
WE'LL SEE WHO'S BEST WITH THE SWORD!

...
YAAII!
WAKK
I SAID COME OUT AND FIGHT!
YOU DEAF OR SOMETHING?!
WHOO
GET UP, DAMN YOU!!
WAKK
FWAKK
CLANK
BAS-TARD!

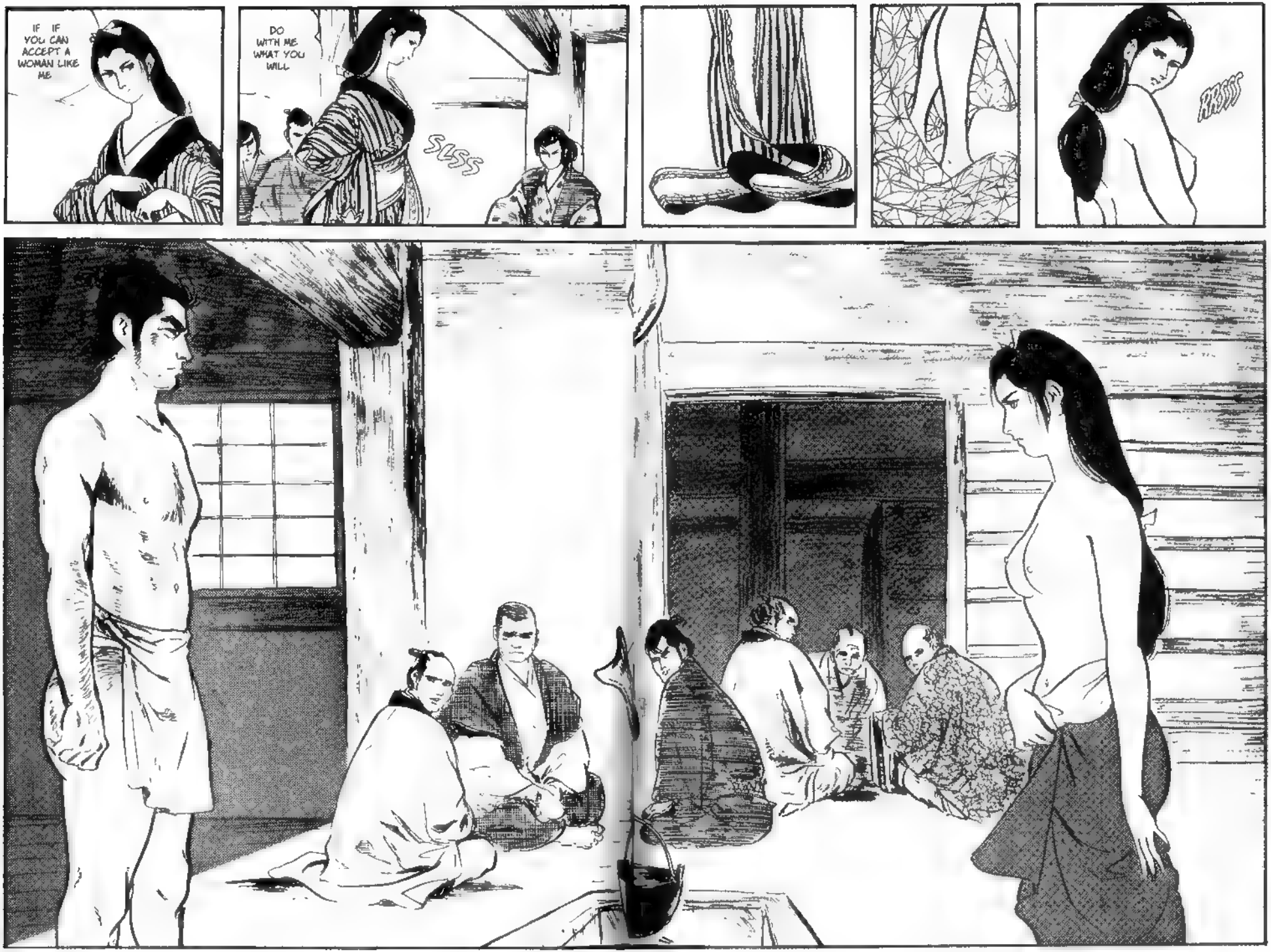
SWISH!
CRACK
WHY YOU...!
. . . !
WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO YOUR KID, HUH?!
HMPH! GIVE IT A BREAK!
NO ONE'S STUPID ENOUGH TO FIGHT YOU, TOBBICHO
THAT'S LIKE COMMITTING SUICIDE, RIGHT?
WHAT?!
THE MAN MAY BE A RŌNIN NOW, BUT HE'S STILL A SAMURAI! HE CAN'T GO AROUND SHOWING HE'S SCARED, OR AFRAID TO FIGHT, OR BEG FOR HIS LIFE IN FRONT OF ALL OF US!
WHY ELSE WOULD HE BE SITTING THERE WITH HIS EYES CLOSED, JUST TAKING IT?! SO LEAVE HIM BE, WHY DON'T YOU? YOU'RE A BIG MAN NOW.

HUM. NOW I GET IT. YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH, GIRL. PRETTY SMART FOR A MAKURA-SAGASHI WHORE!
RIGHT, O-SEN?!
LOOK WHO'S TALKING, YOU ANIMAL.
RIGHT, THEN. IT'S FINE BY ME. I LET HIM OFF HEH HEH HEH. AND IN EXCHANGE...
LET'S HAVE THE TWO OF YOU DO THE DIRTY..
RIGHT NOW! RIGHT HERE!
I'LL BE YOUR APPRECIATIVE AUDIENCE!

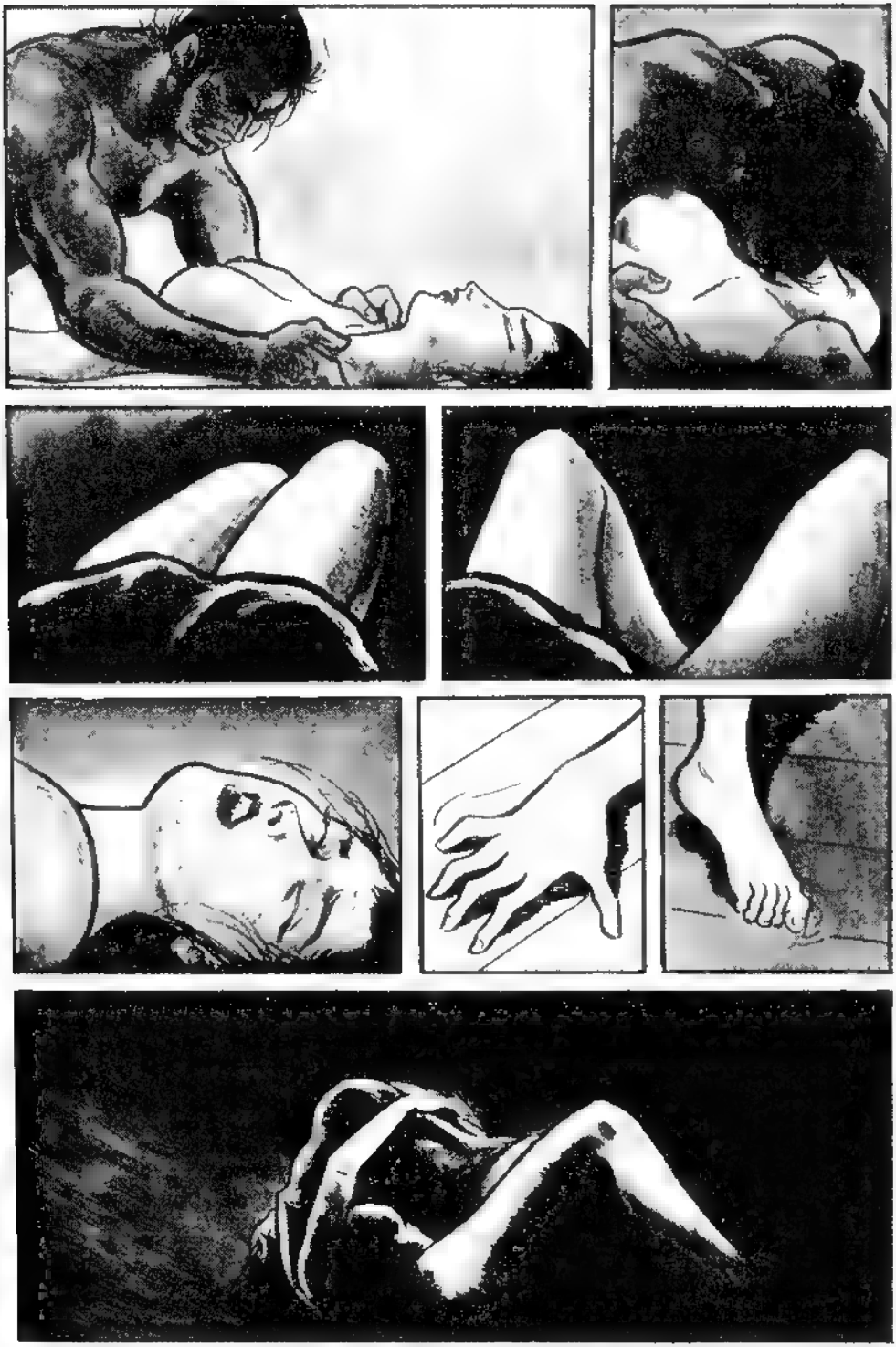

HEH HEH HEH HEH
THAT'S A GOOD ONE
THIS'LL BE SOMETHING TO SEE. HEH HEH HEH
TH- THAT'S *DISGUSTING*. WHO WOULD EVER...
HEY, HEY! I'LL PAY ADMISSION.
SELLING YOUR BODY IS YOUR *BUSINESS*, NO? AND RIPPING OFF THE JOHN'S WALLET WHEN YOU'RE DONE, EH, *MAKURA-SAGASHI*?! LET'S SEE ALL THOSE EIGHTEEN POSITIONS!
S- SCUMBAG!
OOH! SHE DON'T *WANT* TO.
I'D RATHER *DIE*!
IS THAT SO? WISH GRANTED!

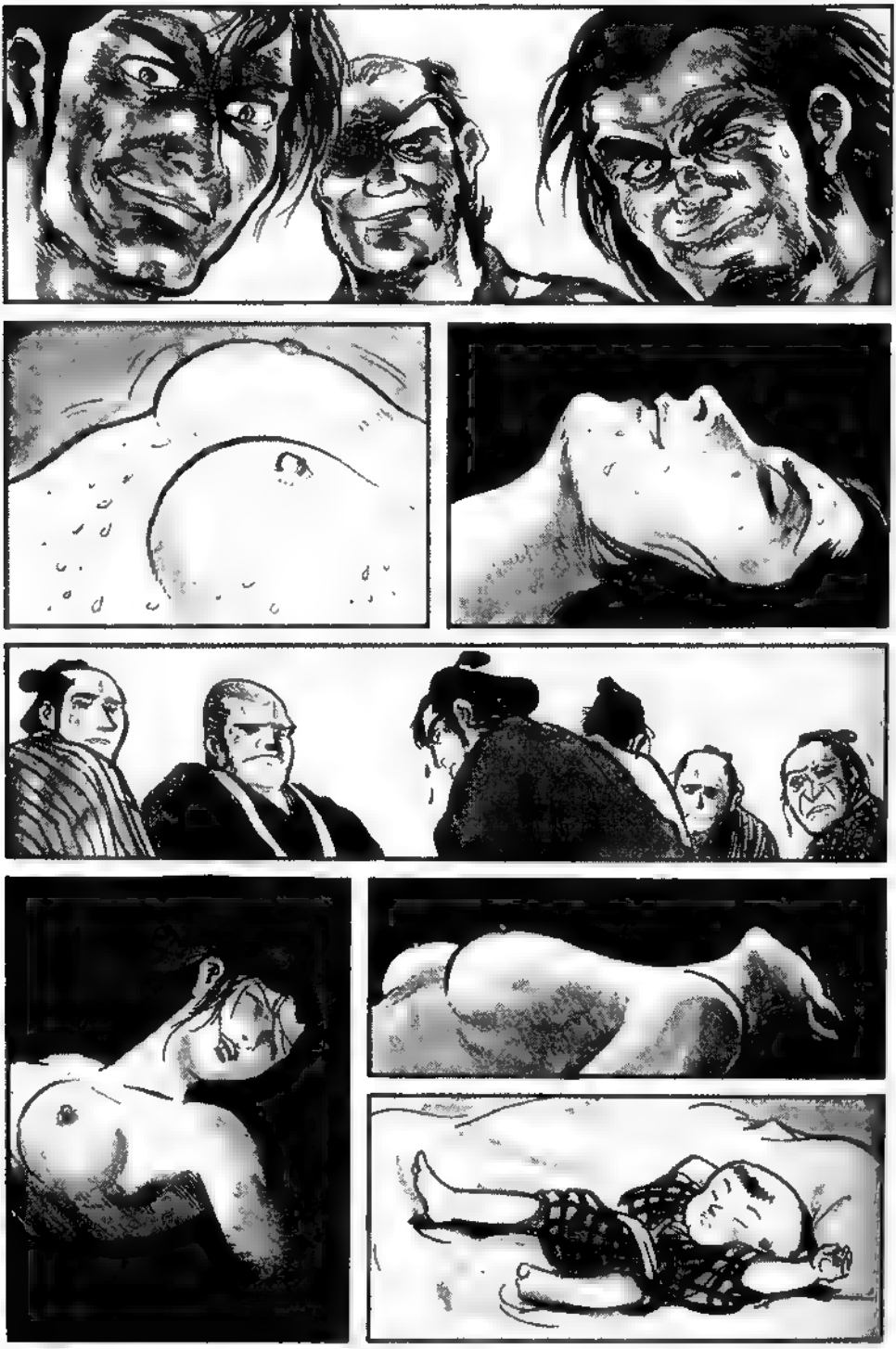
WAIT!
YOU- YOU DON'T
YOU'RE NOT SERIOUS?

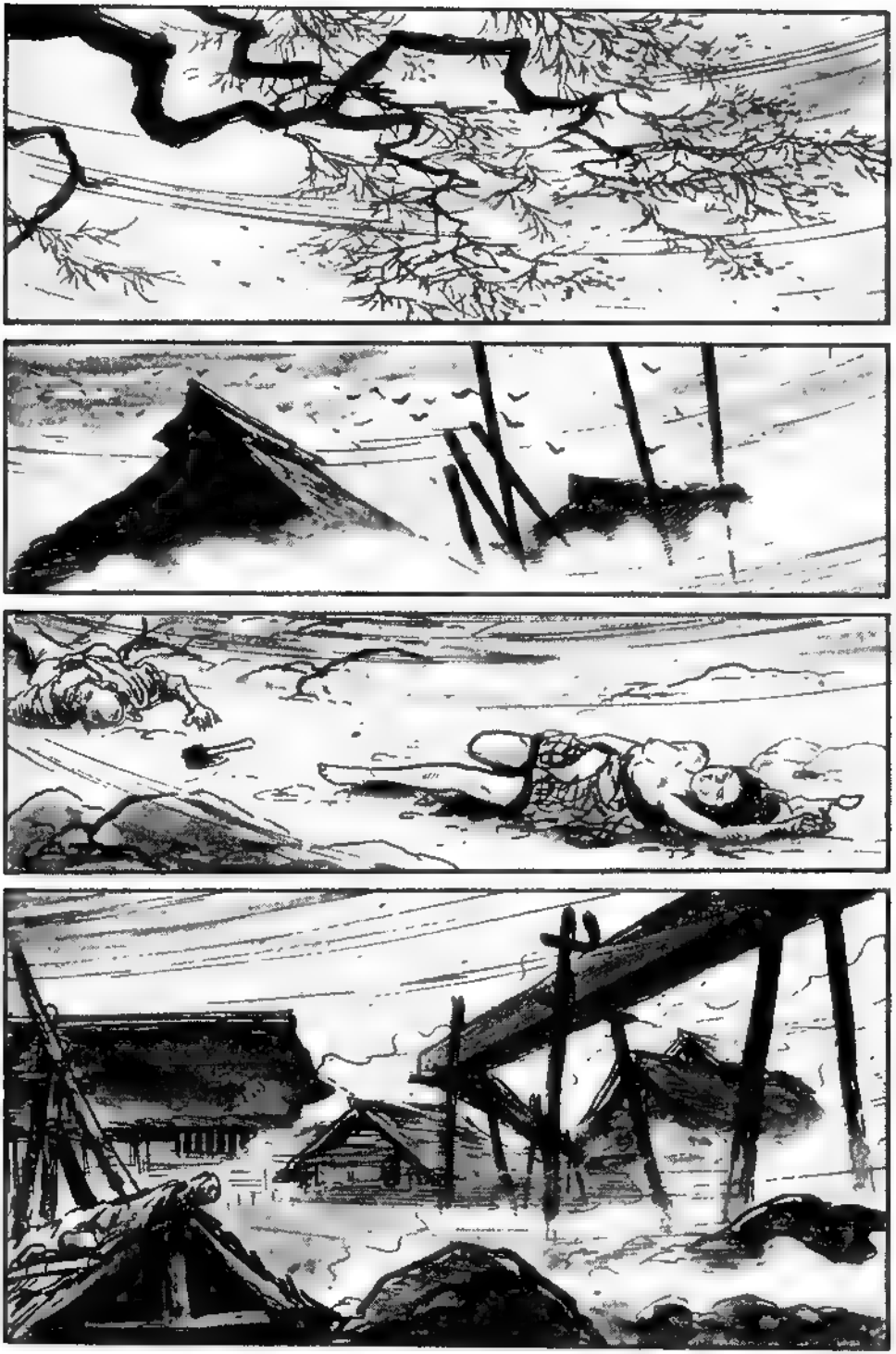
NO YOU
WOULDN'T
NOT FOR


IF IF YOU CAN ACCEPT A WOMAN LIKE ME
DO WITH ME WHAT YOU WILL
SLSS
RSSS

HEH HEH HEH
LOOK AT HER FACE
SHE THINKS SHE S
ST LL A VIRGIN
SHE MUST FIGURE
SHE S KANNON-SAMA
HERSELF TO BE SAVING
THAT COWARD HEE
HEE HEE
OUR GODDESS
OF WHOREDOM, MORE
L KE! BWA HAH HAH
HEE
HEE
HEE

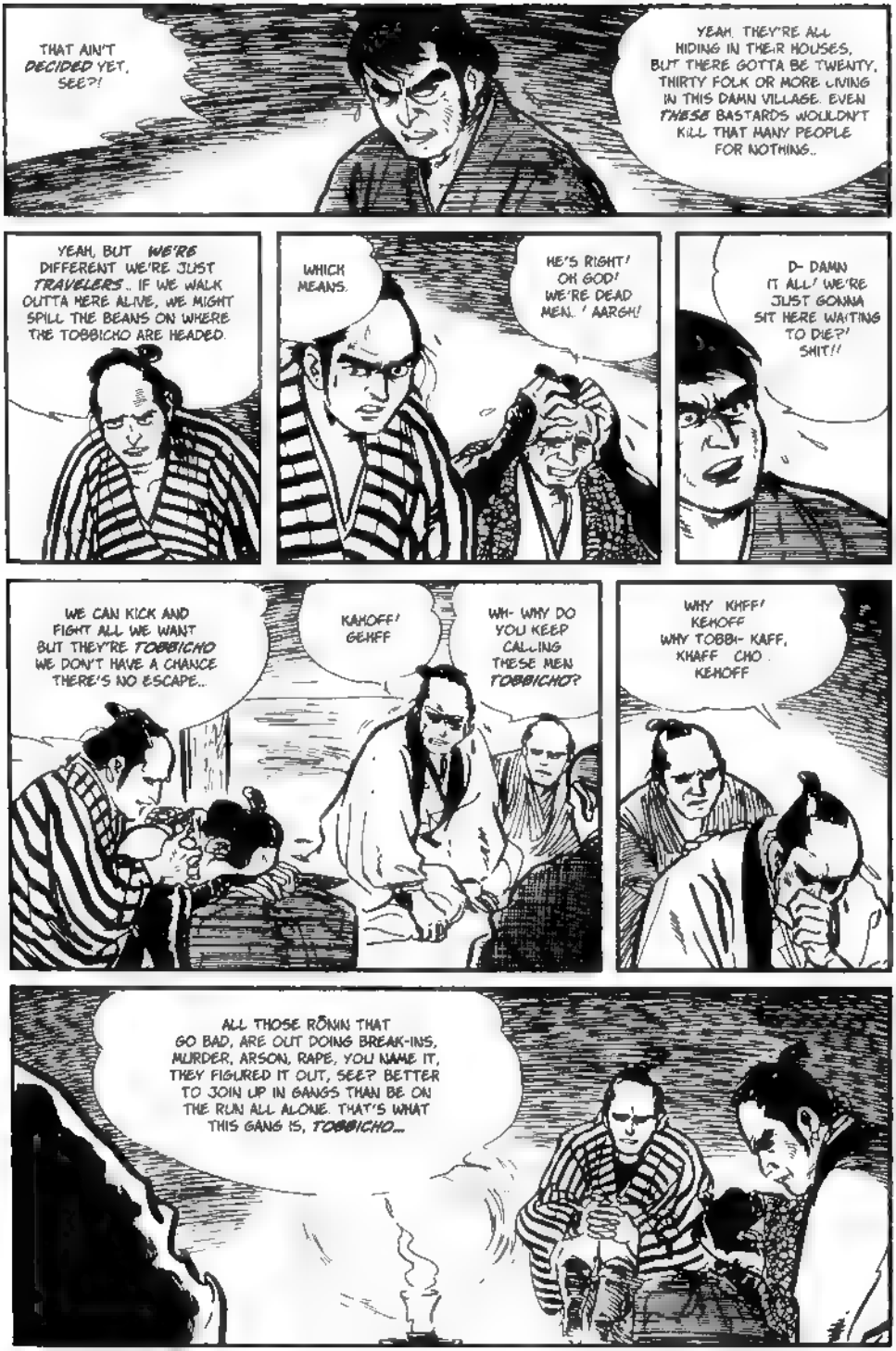


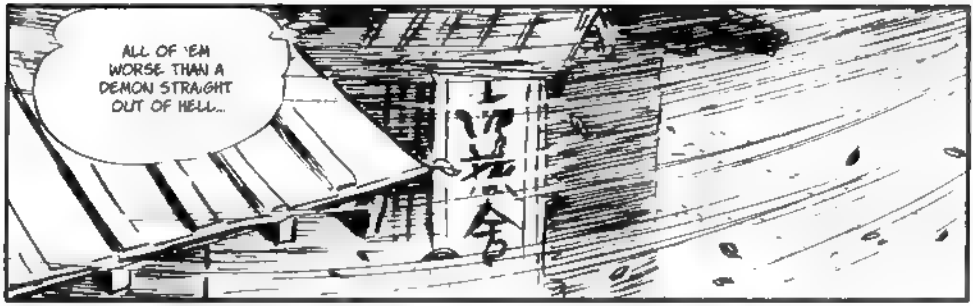




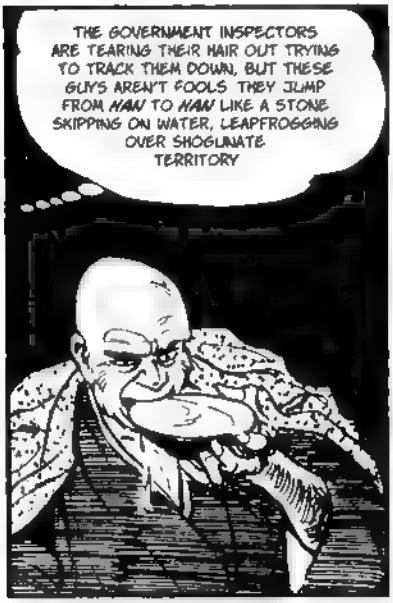
KRK
KRK
"ARIAI SAKE
UWAHAHAHAHAH!
KEH KEH KEH. GYAHAHHA!

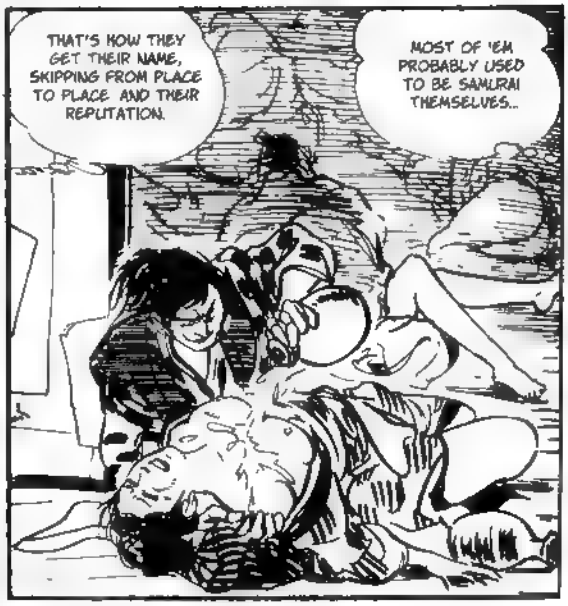
GHFF
GEHFF
NAMU AMIDA BUTSU, NAMU AMIDA BUTSU, NAMU AMIDA...
NAMU AMIDA BUTSU...
JUST CAN IT, YOU DAMNED MONK! HEARING YOU PRAY LIKE WE GOT A FOOT IN THE GRAVE MAKES ME FEEL LIKE A CORPSE ALREADY!
WE WAIT NOW IN A LIVING HELL THE DAY THOSE MEN LEAVE IS THE DAY WE ALL SHALL DIE.
NAMU AMIDA BUTSU, NAMU AMIDA BUTSU...
GEHOFF! UFF!


THAT AIN'T DECIDED YET, SEE?!
YEAH. THEY'RE ALL HIDING IN THEIR HOUSES, BUT THERE GOTTA BE TWENTY, THIRTY FOLK OR MORE LIVING IN THIS DAMN VILLAGE. EVEN THESE BASTARDS WOULDN'T KILL THAT MANY PEOPLE FOR NOTHING..
YEAH, BUT WE'RE DIFFERENT WE'RE JUST TRAVELERS.. IF WE WALK OUTTA HERE ALIVE, WE MIGHT SPILL THE BEANS ON WHERE THE TOBBICHO ARE HEADED.
WHICH MEANS.
HE'S RIGHT! OH GOD! WE'RE DEAD MEN. / AARGH!
D- DAMN IT ALL! WE'RE JUST GONNA SIT HERE WAITING TO DIE?! SHIT!!
WE CAN KICK AND FIGHT ALL WE WANT BUT THEY'RE TOBBICHO WE DON'T HAVE A CHANCE THERE'S NO ESCAPE..
KAHOFF! GEHFF
WH- WHY DO YOU KEEP CALLING THESE MEN TOBBICHO?
WHY KHFF! KEHOFF WHY TOBBI- KAFF, KHAFF CHO KEHOFF
ALL THOSE RŌNIN THAT GO BAD, ARE OUT DOING BREAK-INS, MURDER, ARSON, RAPE, YOU NAME IT, THEY FIGURED IT OUT, SEE? BETTER TO JOIN UP IN GANGS THAN BE ON THE RUN ALL ALONE. THAT'S WHAT THIS GANG IS, TOBBICHO...


ALL OF 'EM WORSE THAN A DEMON STRAIGHT OUT OF HELL...

THEY'VE ALL GOT HUNDREDS OF RYŌ ON THEIR HEADS..
A WHO'S WHO OF JAPAN'S MOST WANTED, ALL IN ONE PLACE...


THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTORS ARE TEARING THEIR HAIR OUT TRYING TO TRACK THEM DOWN, BUT THESE GUYS AREN'T FOOLS THEY JUMP FROM HAN TO HAN LIKE A STONE SKIPPING ON WATER, LEAPFROGGING OVER SHOGUNATE TERRITORY


THAT'S HOW THEY GET THEIR NAME, SKIPPING FROM PLACE TO PLACE AND THEIR REPUTATION.
MOST OF 'EM PROBABLY USED TO BE SAMURAI THEMSELVES...

BUT NOW THEY'RE JUST ANIMALS A PACK OF BEASTS, WITH THEIR FANGS BARED..
Spee!
THIS PLACE'S GOT ALL THESE THERMAL VENTS. YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO BUILD A FIRE. IT'S A PERFECT PLACE TO SPEND THE WINTER..
I FIGURE THEY'RE GONNA CAMP OUT HERE FOR THE LONG HAUL...
WE JUST WAIT FOR THEM TO GET CARELESS, AND THEN..
FORGET IT! WE'RE OUT OF TIME. THEY'RE ALREADY RUNNING OUT OF FOOD AND SAKE BY TOMORROW EVEN, THEY'LL PULL UP STAKES
HEEK!
SAMURAI-SAMA, DO SOMETHING! PLEASE!
I- I DON'T WANT TO DIE! SAVE US! I'M BEGGING YOU!
SHUDDUP! YOU SAW WHAT THAT RŌNIN DID TO SAVE HIS SKIN. THEY DON'T GOT NO GUTS!
NO MORE SHAME THAN THOSE OTHER ANIMALS EXCEPT THIS ONE'S HAD HIS FANGS PULLED FORGET ABOUT HIM.

SILENCE!
WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO BOAST ABOUT?! A PICKPOCKET AND A CHEAP YAKUZA!
I WAS READY TO BITE OFF MY TONGUE AND DIE BACK THEN. AND HE SAW IT. THAT'S WHY HE SWALLOWED HIS SHAME AND VOLUNTEERED TO SLEEP WITH ME...
DO YOU KNOW HOW HAPPY THAT MAKES ME? SAVING THE LIFE OF A WOMAN LIKE ME?
HE GAVE UP ALL HIS SAMURAI PRIDE AND POSTURING JUST FOR ME...
SHIT! THERE ARE HUNDREDS OUT BUYING YOTAKA EVERY NIGHT. DON'T KID YOURSELF...
AND WOULD ALL THOSE SAMURAI OUT PAYING FOR YOTAKA PUT ASIDE THEIR PRIDE TO SAVE ONE FROM DEATH, MM?
B- BUT HE SLEPT WITH YOU CUZ YOU WANTED TO SAVE HIS HIDE, RIGHT?!
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND [redacted] ASK YOUR OWN DICK, WHY DON'T YOU?
WHAT THE HECK?!
WHEN YOU'RE SHAKING AND PEEING IN YOUR PANTS THAT YOU'RE GOING TO DIE, COULD YOU SATISFY A WOMAN, MM?!
UH...

WH-WHERE...?
WHERE YA GOIN'?
THIS IS A HOT SPRING... WHERE ELSE WOULD I GO EXCEPT THE BATHS?
AAHHHN..
GOOD ENOUGH. GUESS THEY SAY FOLK SHOULD WASH UP BEFORE THEY DIE.
HEH. WASH THAT GRIME OFF YOUR MISERABLE NECKS, OKAY?
HEH HEH HEH
KSHNG

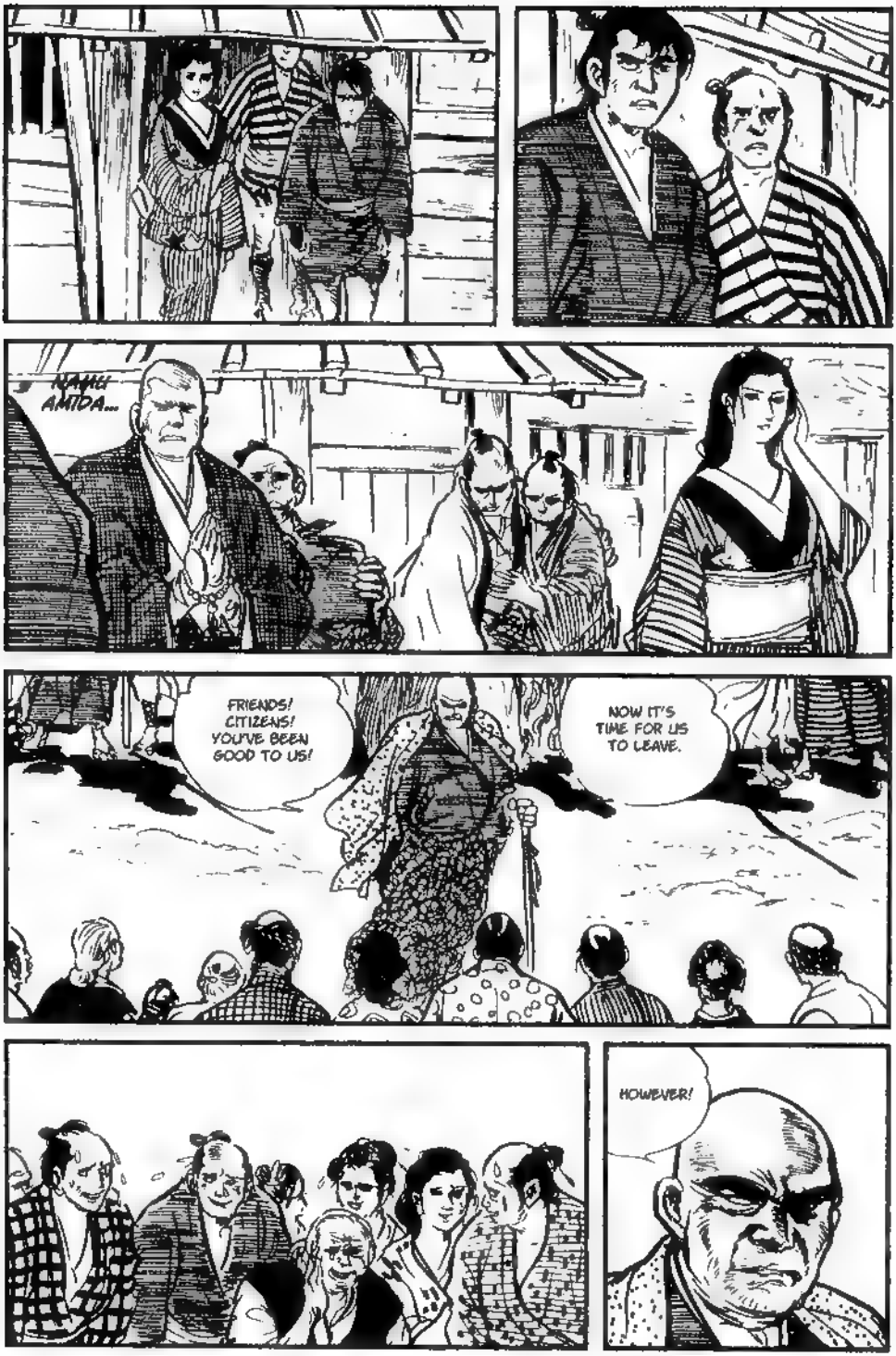
SPLOOSH
PHEWW!
SPLSH
SPLSH

THIS HOT SPRING IS NAMED GÔMORI-JUKU, BUT EVERYONE CALLS IT KÔMORI-JUKU.
DO YOU KNOW WHY?
....
BATS? KÔMORI? THEY'RE NOT BIRDS, BUT THEY HAVE WINGS THEY'RE NOT BEASTS, BUT THEY HAVE FANGS.
THEY DON'T BELONG. AND US FOLK LIKE THOSE BATS, OUTSIDERS ALL...
WE ALL STARTED COMING HERE, LOOKING FOR A LITTLE COMFORT, SOME PEACE OF MIND.
AND THAT'S THE STORY OF KÔMORI-JUKU...
BUT THESE TOBBICHO THEY'RE DIFFERENT. THEY'RE BEASTS WITH FANGS... AND YOU, YOU'RE A BIRD WITH WINGS.
...
WINGS AND FANGS LIKE THE POOR LITTLE BATS'LL NEVER HAVE...
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY..?
YOU AREN'T AFRAID OF THE FANGS OF THESE BEASTS, NOT IN THE SLIGHTEST... WHICH MEANS YOU MUST HAVE WINGS TO FLY AWAY..

I CAN TELL, YOU KNOW I'VE GONE FROM MAN TO MAN ALL MY LIFE. I KNOW ABOUT YOUR WINGS..
I HEARD A STORY IN THE CASTLE TOWN ON MY WAY UP HERE... FOUR SAMURAI FROM THE CASTLE, ALL DEAD....
STRONG, SKILLED FIGHTERS, EVERY ONE OF THEM..
LONE WOLF AND CUB..
THEY SAID THERE'S A KILLER OUT THERE WHO USES THAT NAME...
HERE, SWEETIE. LET AUNTIE WASH YOU, OKAY?
AH HAH HAH!
YOUR NAME...?
MAKURA-SAGASHI O-SEAL.
I'VE BEEN TRAVELING. LOOKING. FOR THAT LONE WOLF AND CUB.
IF YOU SHOULD BE HIM.
THEN, I'M HAPPY. THAT'S ALL...
YOU'RE NOT AFRAID OF THE TOBBICHO?
NOT REALLY... I FIGURE, WE ALL DIE SOMEDAY...

IT GETS WORSE AND WORSE THE LONGER WE LIVE...
FOR WOMEN LIKE ME ?
ROUSE YOUR ASSES!!
ALL RIGHT, YA WHIMPS!! GET ON OUT HERE!

HURRY UP OR I'LL KILL YA MYSELF!
DAMN COWARDS!


NAMU AMIDA...
FRIENDS! CITIZENS! YOU'VE BEEN GOOD TO US!
NOW IT'S TIME FOR US TO LEAVE.
HOWEVER!

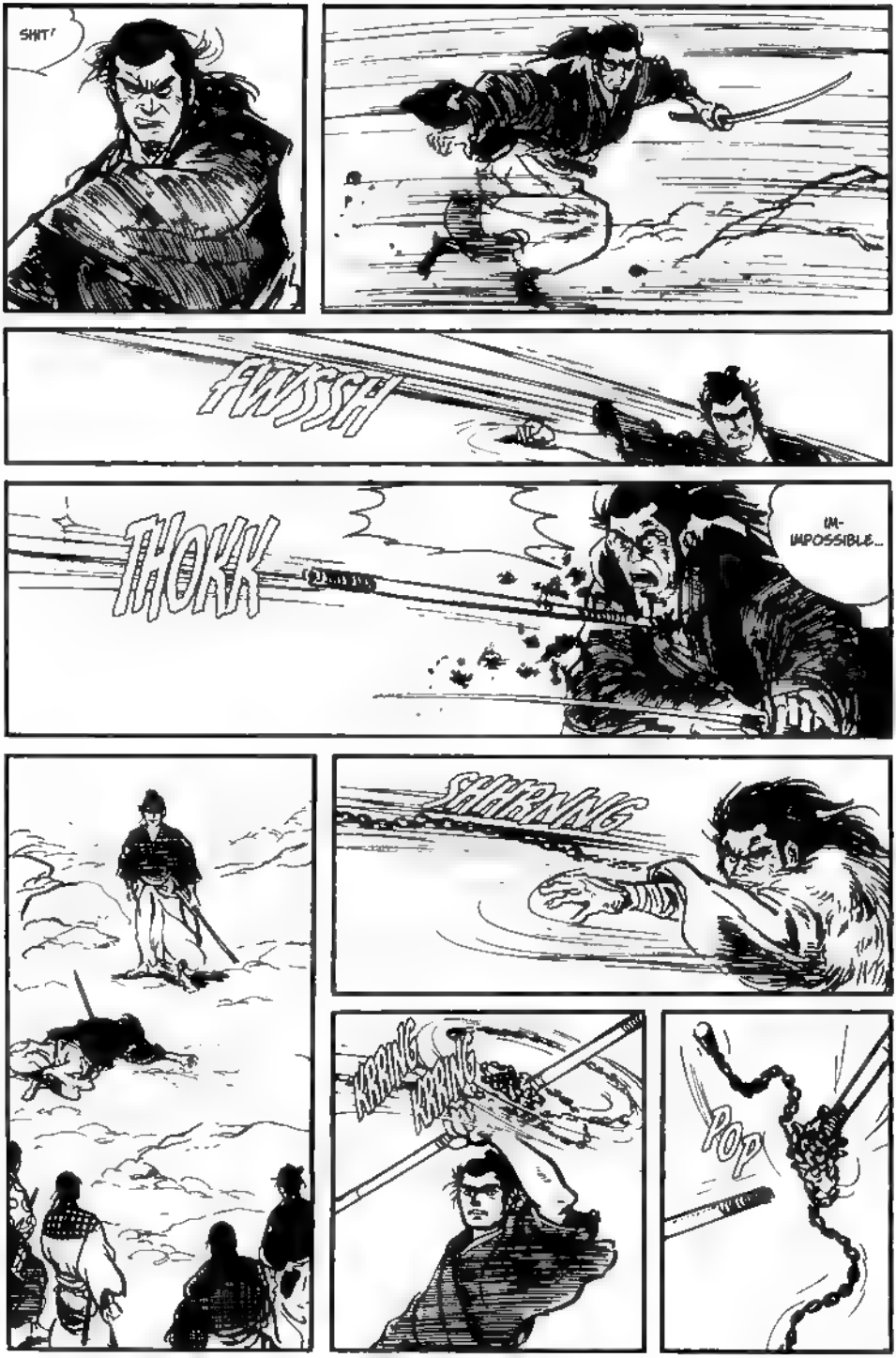
THERE'S ONE THING I WANT YOU ALL TO REMEMBER.
IF YOU SAY ONE THING, ONE SINGLE WORD, ABOUT US TO THE LAWMEN...
FASSH
SHING
CHAK!
KSHANG
KIII!
YOU'RE DEAD MEAT!
heh heh heh.
AS FOR YOU GUYS. GOTTA ASK YOU TO DIE. TWO REASONS.
WE CAN'T RISK LETTING YOU LEAVE AND WE NEED TO SHOW THESE PEASANTS WE MEAN BUSINESS. JUST FIGURE YOU GOT DEALT A BAD HAND, AND GO QUIETLY

S- SAVE ME! I'LL DO ANYTHING!
DON'T KILL ME! GOD, NO!!
WE WON'T SAY NOTHING TO NOBODY! PROMISE!
JUST SPARE US! MERCY..!
WE'LL START WITH YOU, SAMURAI.
KACHINK
PICK 'EM UP! AND THEN COME AT ME! WE'LL LET YOU DIE LIKE A WARRIOR.
I... AM PREPARED TO DIE... AND YET, SO SICK AND WEAK...
I HAVE NO STRENGTH TO FIGHT YOU! I SHALL CUT MY OWN STOMACH AND REQUEST... KAISHAKU!
KAISHAKU! KAISHAKU...?

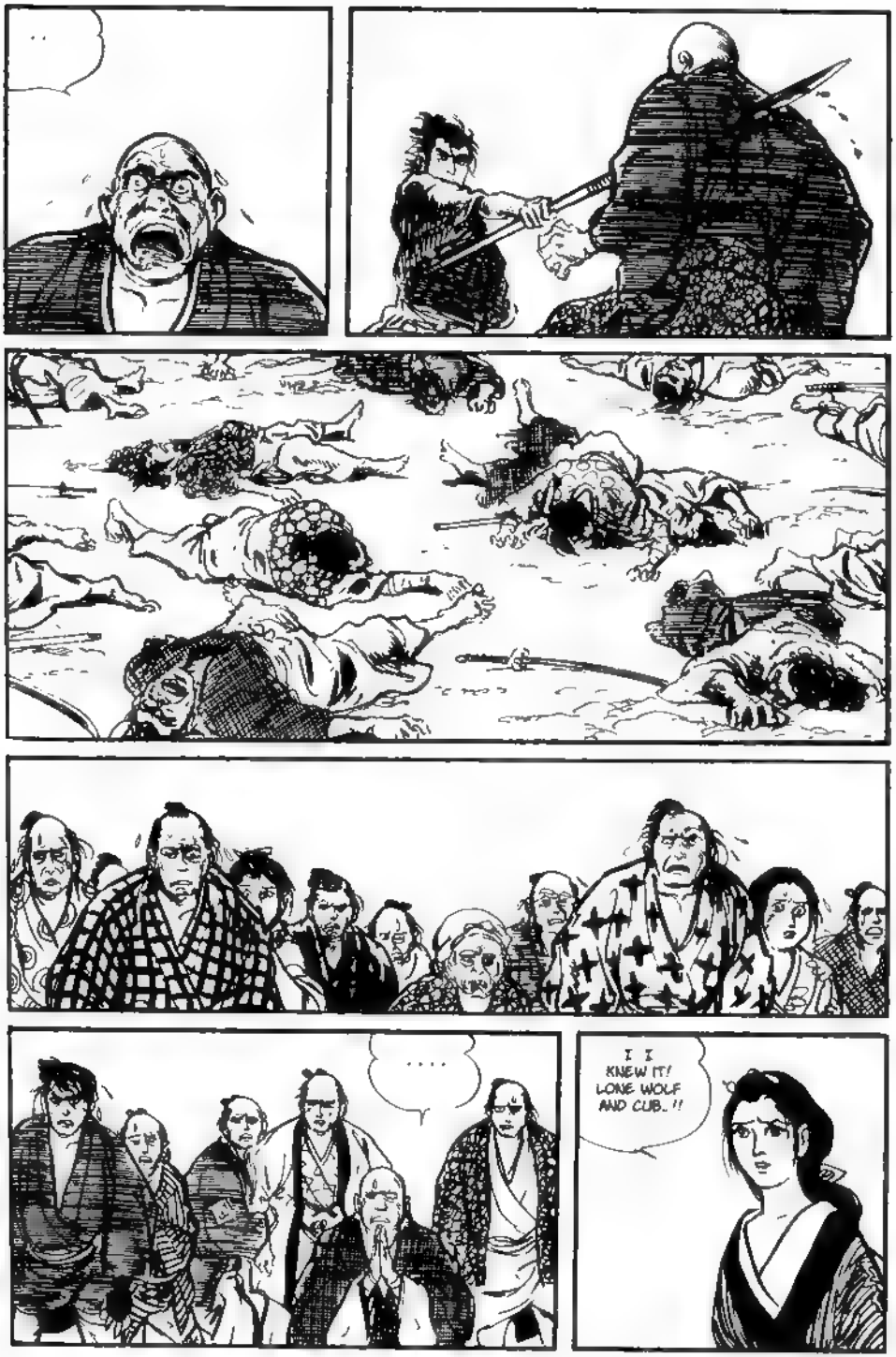
NAMU AMIDA BUTSU, NAMU AMIDA..
PRAYING. OGAMI
OGAMI...?
OGA. MI ?
KAISHAKUNIN, ŌGAMI ITTŌ?!
HIM! THAT MAN!
WHERE'D THAT RŌNIN GO?!

GARA
GARA
KAH?!
THAT SCUM!
STOP RIGHT THERE!
YOU BASTARD! WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOIN'?!

WE CAME FOR A NIGHT IN THE BATHS. THE NIGHT IS OVER, THE SUN HAS RISEN. WE LEAVE...
Y- YOU LEAVE..?
ARE YOU CRAZY?
L- LET HIM GO, MONNOSUKE!
DON'T- DON'T LAY A FINGER ON THAT MAN!
WH- WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?! WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?
HE'S NO BIG DE-
YOU IDIOT! STOP!!
WHIP
SKOSSH
UGYAHH!


SHIT!
FWSSH
THOKK
UH-
IMPOSSIBLE...
SHRRNG
KRRING KRRING
POP

YAHHHH!
KAWW
KAWW
GYAA
GYAA
KYAA
KYAA
NO! NO! I... I DON'T KNOW YOU! SPARE ME!
I- I WON'T TELL ANYONE! I WON'T TELL THEM YOU'RE... THE SHOGUN'S EXECUTIONER! NEVER!!

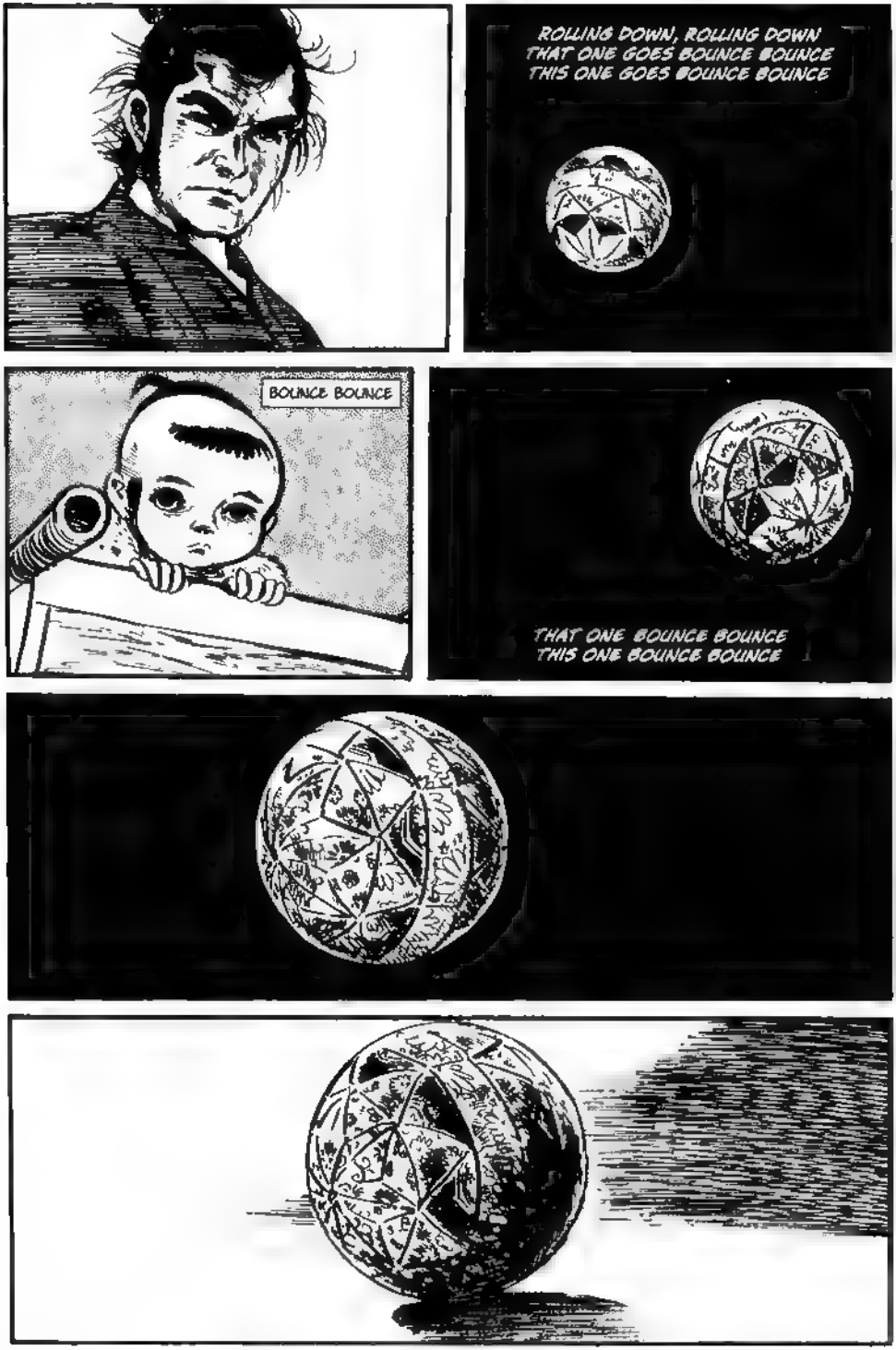

..
....
I I KNEW IT! LONE WOLF AND CUB..!!

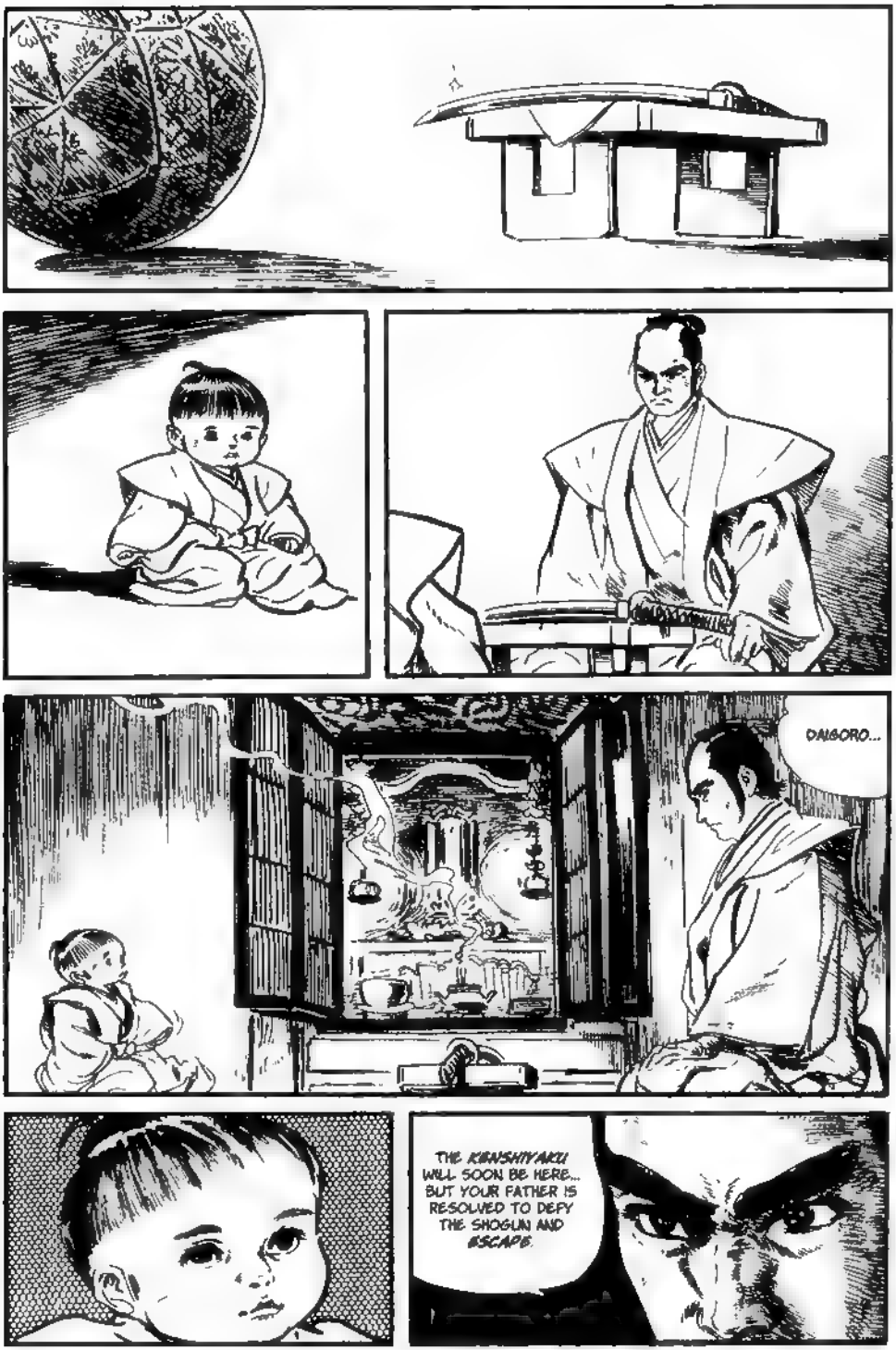
GARA
GARA
GARA
GARA
GARA
GARA
WAIT!
WAIT FOR ME..!

the ninth

The Assassin's Road

IF YOU HAVE A HARD SHIT
ON A MOUNTAINTOP
DOWN IT ROLLS,
COVERED WITH SAND
BOUNCE BOUNCE BOUNCE...
THAT
ONE GOES
BOUNCE
BOUNCE
THIS ONE GOES
BOUNCE BOUNCE
FROM THE HIGH MOUNTAINTOP


ROLLING DOWN, ROLLING DOWN
THAT ONE GOES BOUNCE BOUNCE
THIS ONE GOES BOUNCE BOUNCE
BOUNCE BOUNCE
THAT ONE BOUNCE BOUNCE
THIS ONE BOUNCE BOUNCE

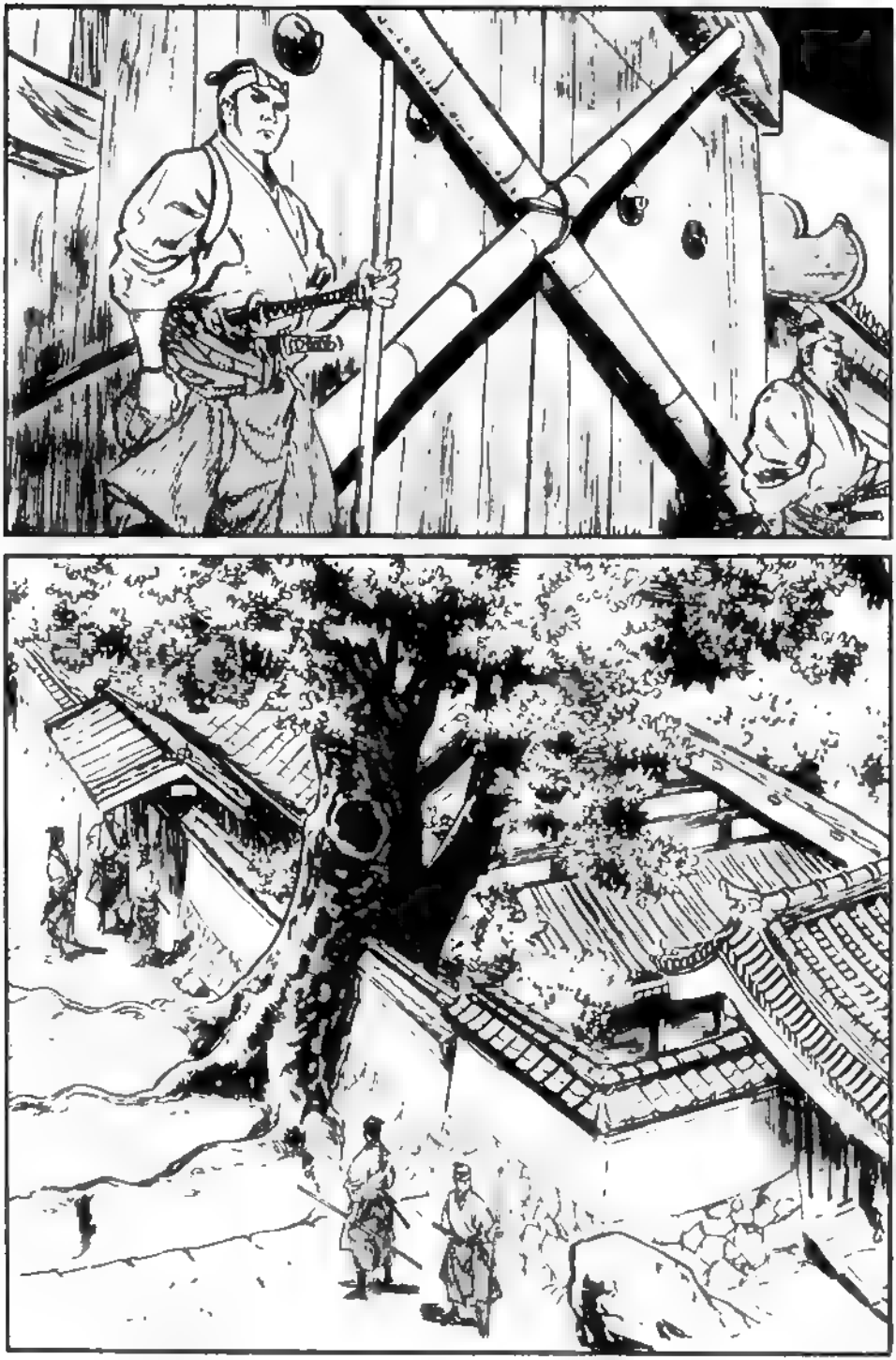

DAIGORO...
THE KIANSHIYAKU WILL SOON BE HERE... BUT YOUR FATHER IS RESOLVED TO DEFY THE SHOGUN AND ESCAPE.

TO AVENGE THE ŌGAMI CLAN AND CLEAR THE NAME OF THE KAISHAKUNIN EXECUTIONER, I ABANDON THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI, AND TRAVEL THE PATH TO HELL, A LIVING DEMON OF MUJIHUHADŌ!
LISTEN WELL, DAIGORO!
YOUR FATHER NOW WALKS THE ASSASSIN'S ROAD, A PATH OF BLOOD AND CORPSES, SLAUGHTER AND HEARTLESS CRUELTY!
THERE IS NO OTHER WAY TO AVENGE OURSELVES ON THE ASSASSINS OF THE YAGYŪ CLAN...
NO OTHER WAY TO ASSUAGE THE SPIRITS OF OUR DEAD, DENIED BUDDHAHOOD BY THEIR UNAVENGED MURDERS..
CHAKI!
DAIGORO! YOU MUST FIND YOUR OWN PATH!
CHOOSE THE DŌTANUKI, AND JOIN YOUR FATHER ON THE ASSASSIN'S ROAD. CHOOSE THE CHILD'S TEMARI, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO JOIN YOUR MOTHER IN YOMI, THE LAND OF SPIRITS.

DAIGORO!!
OF COURSE YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND.
NOT YOUR FATHER'S WORDS, NOR WHAT YOUR FUTURE HOLDS.
BUT THE BLOOD OF THE ŌGAMI CLAN RUNNING THROUGH YOUR VEINS SHALL CHOOSE
AKYA!
LOOK! LOOK, DAIGORO!
PATT
PATT
UU MA-MAM..
THAP
GHOK
CHOOSE, DAIGORO!

UUBA
UUBA
ABA
KYA! KYA!
.....

YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN HAPPIER AT YOUR DEAD MOTHER'S SIDE.. MY POOR CHILD.
AN ASSASSIN WITH CHILD
REMEMBER, DAIGORO' THIS IS OUR DESTINY



SWORDBEARER ŌGAMI ITTŌ! THOUGH YOU SERVE THE SHOGUN IN THE HIGH OFFICE OF KAISHAKUNIN EXECUTIONER, YOUR INNUMERABLE INSULTS AGAINST OUR LORD AND RULER LEAVE US SPEECHLESS! KNOW THAT YOU ARE HEREBY STRIPPED OF YOUR TITLE, YOUR FAMILY NAME STRICKEN FROM THE LISTS! YOUR SENTENCE IS DEATH BY SEPPUKU FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR ONLY CHILD DAIGORO!

YOU GREET US IN THE WHITE ROBES OF DEATH. YOUR RESOLUTION IS ADMIRABLE. I WOULD EXPECT NO LESS OF KAISHAKUNIN ŌGAMI ITTŌ, WHOSE SWORD IS KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE LAND!
MAGNIFICENT DETERMINATION!
HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH...
WE DO NOT WEAR THESE CLOTHES TO CUT OPEN OUR STOMACHS.
THESE ARE THE GARMENTS OF A NEW BEGINNING! FROM THIS VERY MOMENT, FATHER AND SON, WE JOURNEY TO MEIFUMADŌ! HEH HEH HEH HEH...
WH-WHAT IS THIS?!
AUGH!

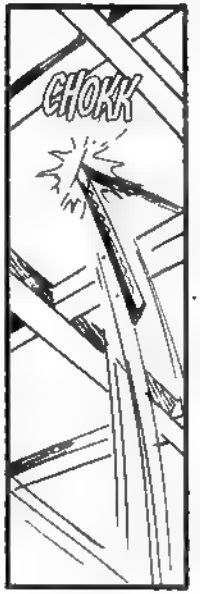
HOW DARE YOU!
YOU DEFY THE WILL OF THE SHOGUN?!
SHNNG
PRRRP
SHNNG
WE WHO WALK THE DEMON'S PATH ARE NO LONGER ORDINARY MEN!
THE SHOGUN'S WILL?! DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH!

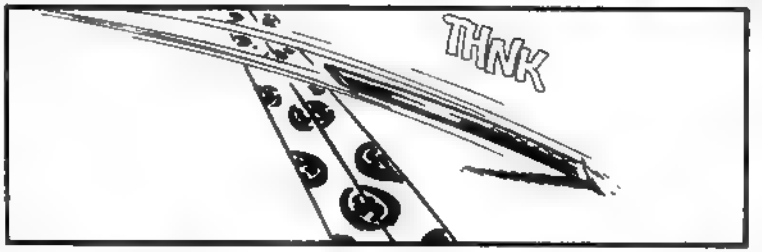
TR – TREACHERY! HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!
GUARDS!!
GUARDS! GUARDS! ŌGAMI ITTŌ RESISTS!! GUARDS!
INSURRECTIONIST! YOU MOCK THE WILL OF THE SHOGUN! KILL HIM! CUT HIM DOWN!
CAN YOU KILL ME?!
WITH THOSE FEEBLE ARMS?!

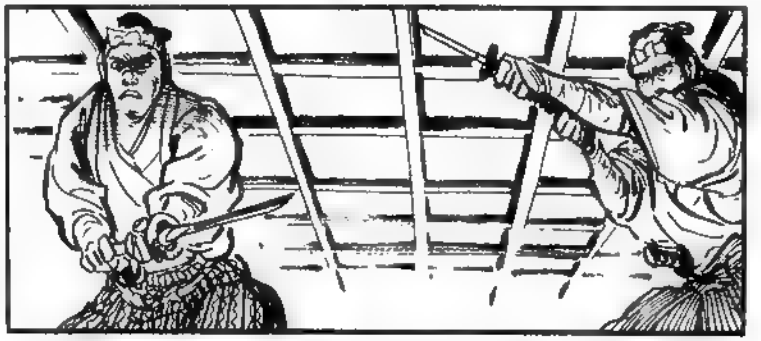
CAN YOU KILL ME?! THE SHOGUN'S OWN EXECUTIONER?!

CUT HIM DOWN! LIKE A DOG!
WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?! ATTACK!

SHKK
FYUU
KSHANNG

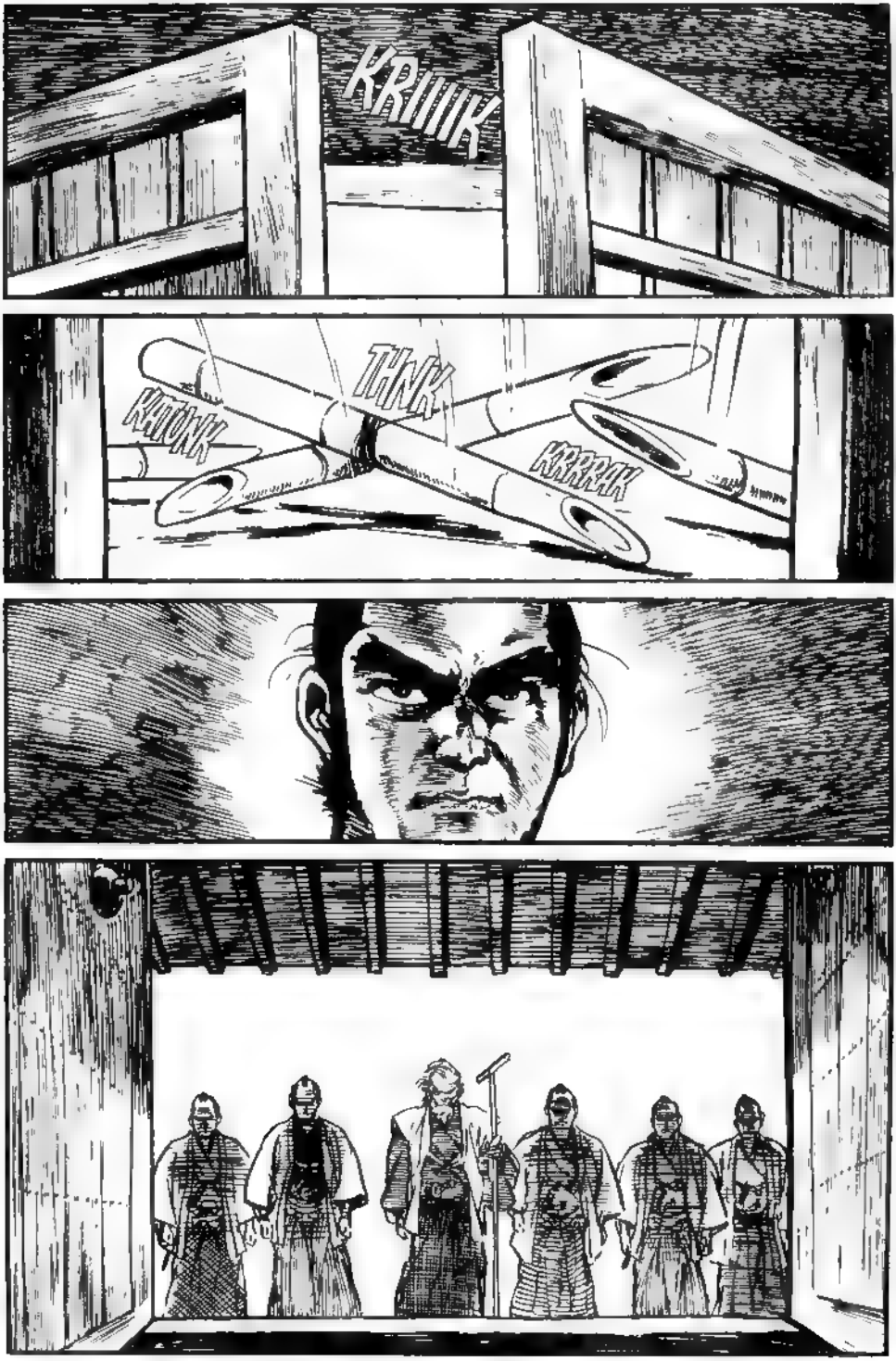

CHOKK

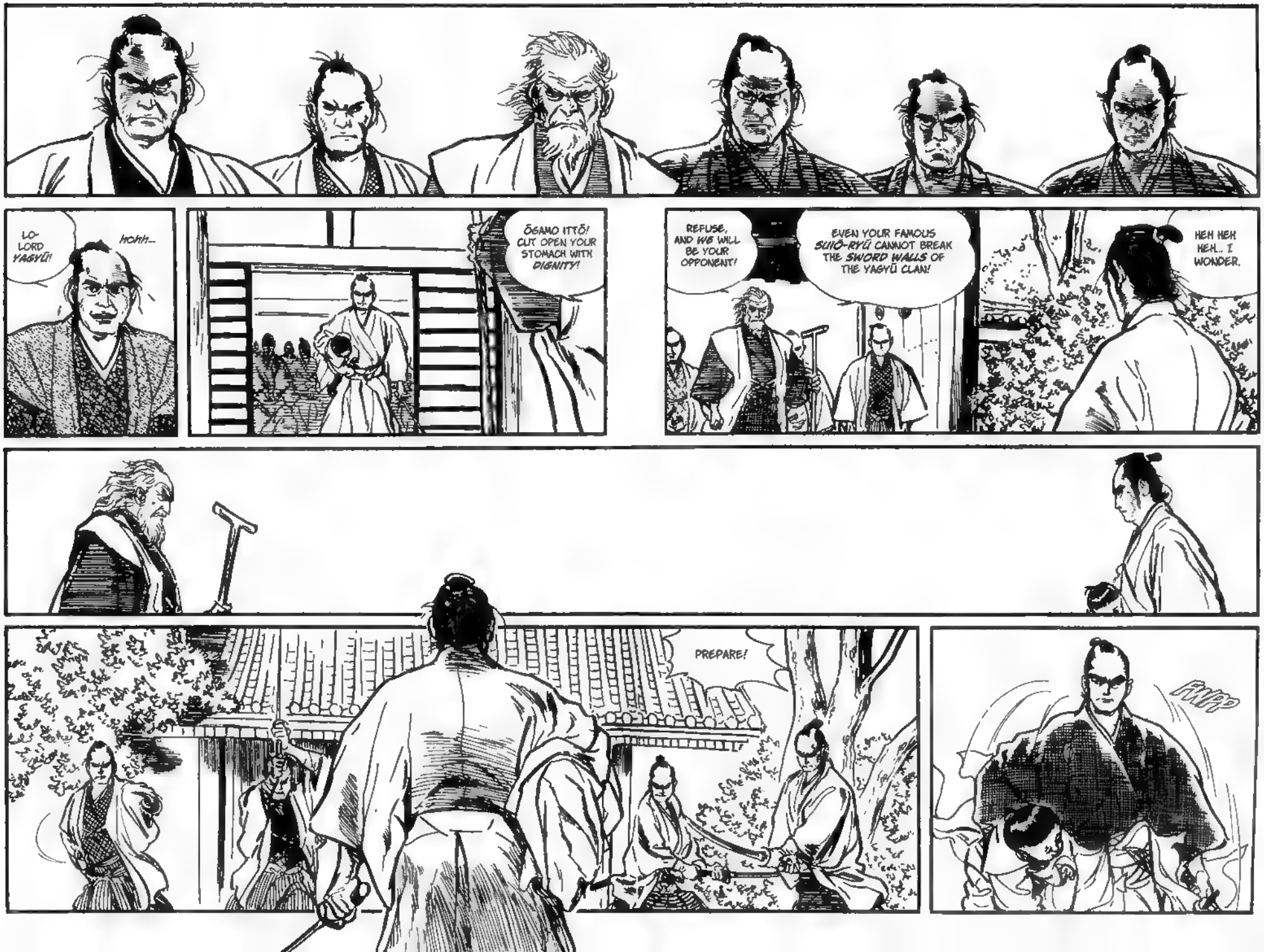

THNK



SPLRT
SHAHH

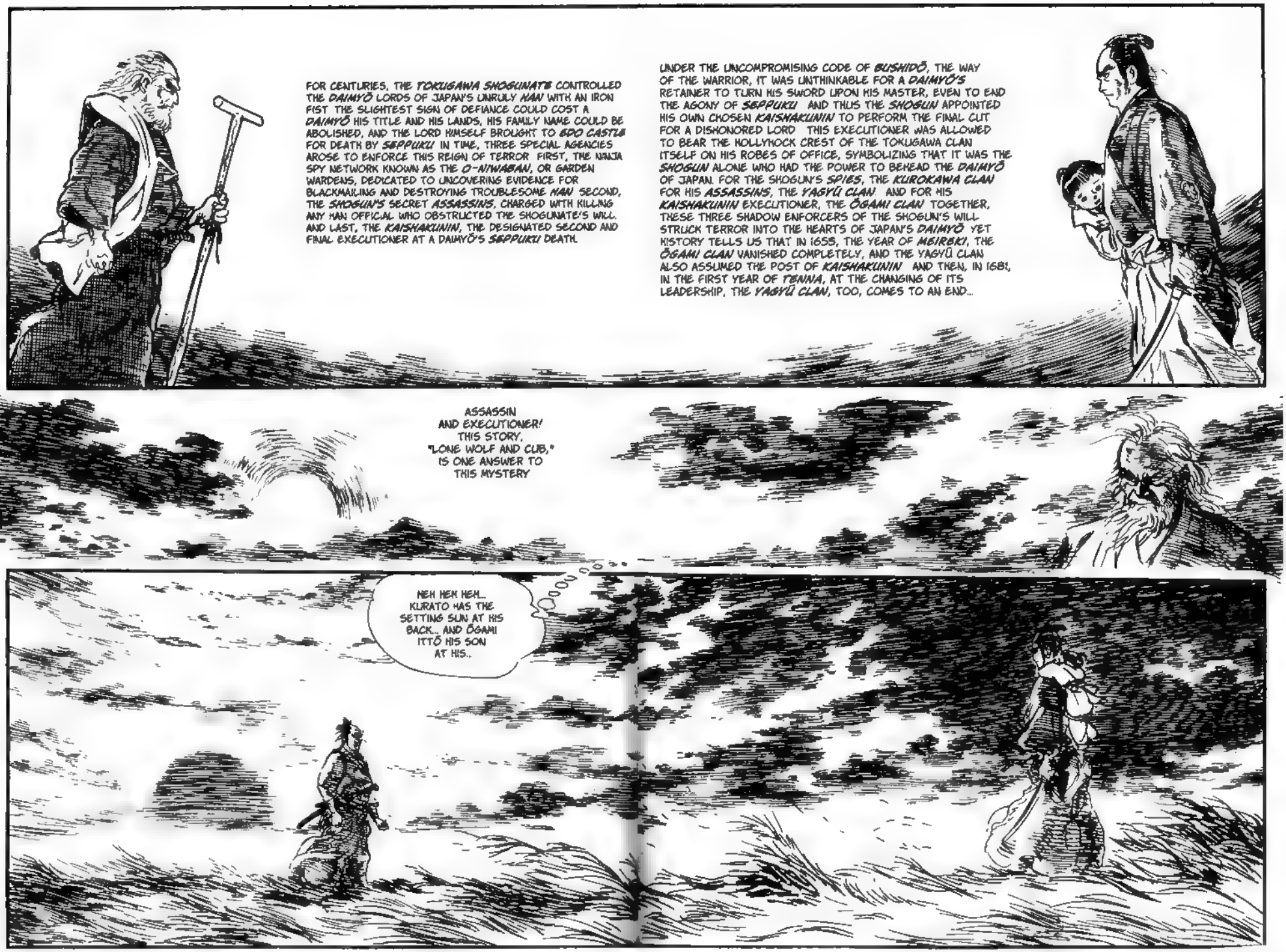
WHY RUSH TO DIE?
DAMN IT! KILL HIM!! KILL!!

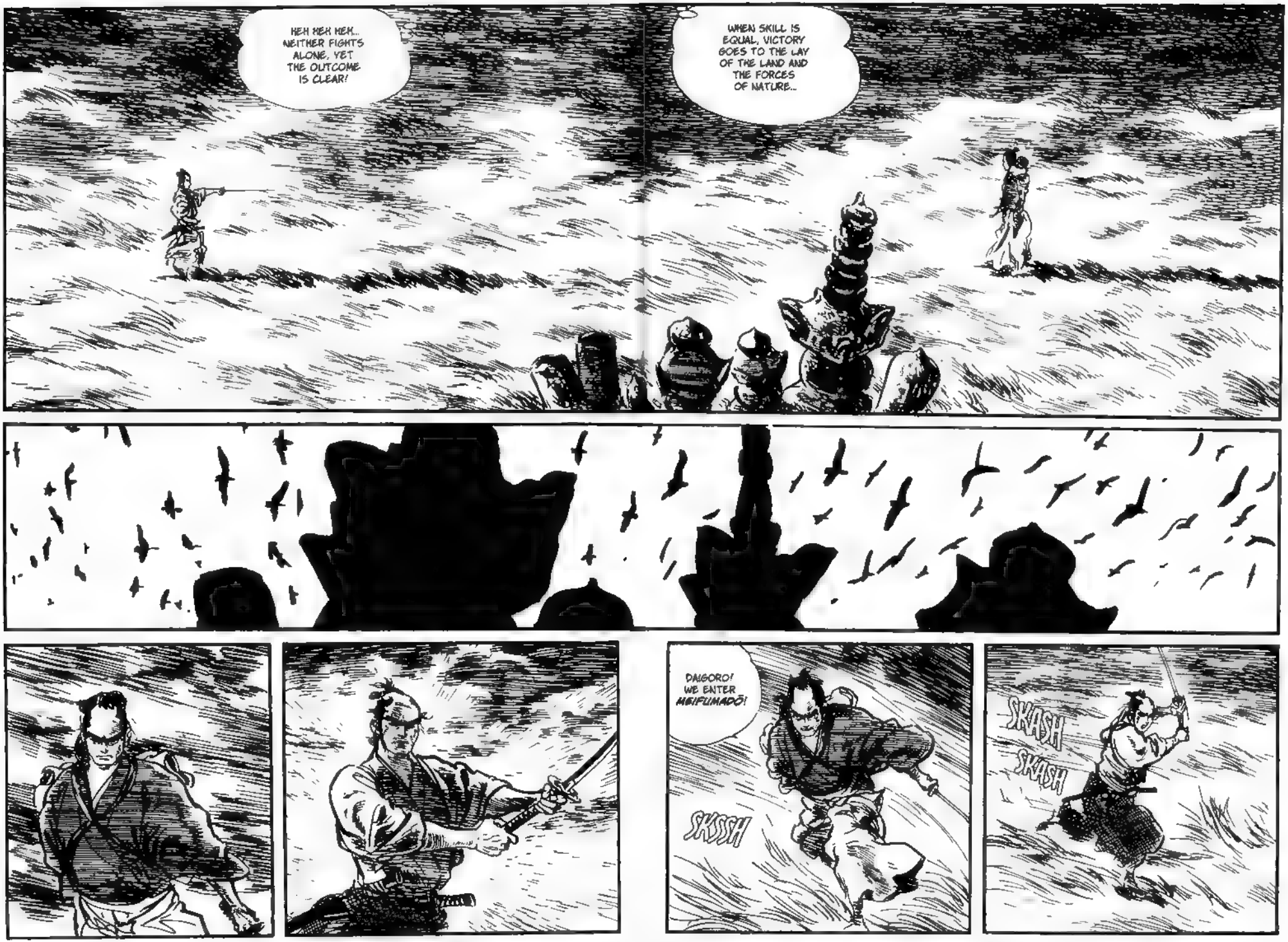

KRIIIK
KKOKK
THNK
KRRRK


LO- LORD YAGYŪ!
HOHH...
ŌGAMO ITTŌ! CUT OPEN YOUR STOMACH WITH DIGNITY!
REFUSE, AND WE WILL BE YOUR OPPONENT!
EVEN YOUR FAMOUS SHIŌ-RYŪ CANNOT BREAK THE SWORD WALLS OF THE YAGYŪ CLAN!
HEH HEH HEH... I WONDER.
PREPARE!
FWIP

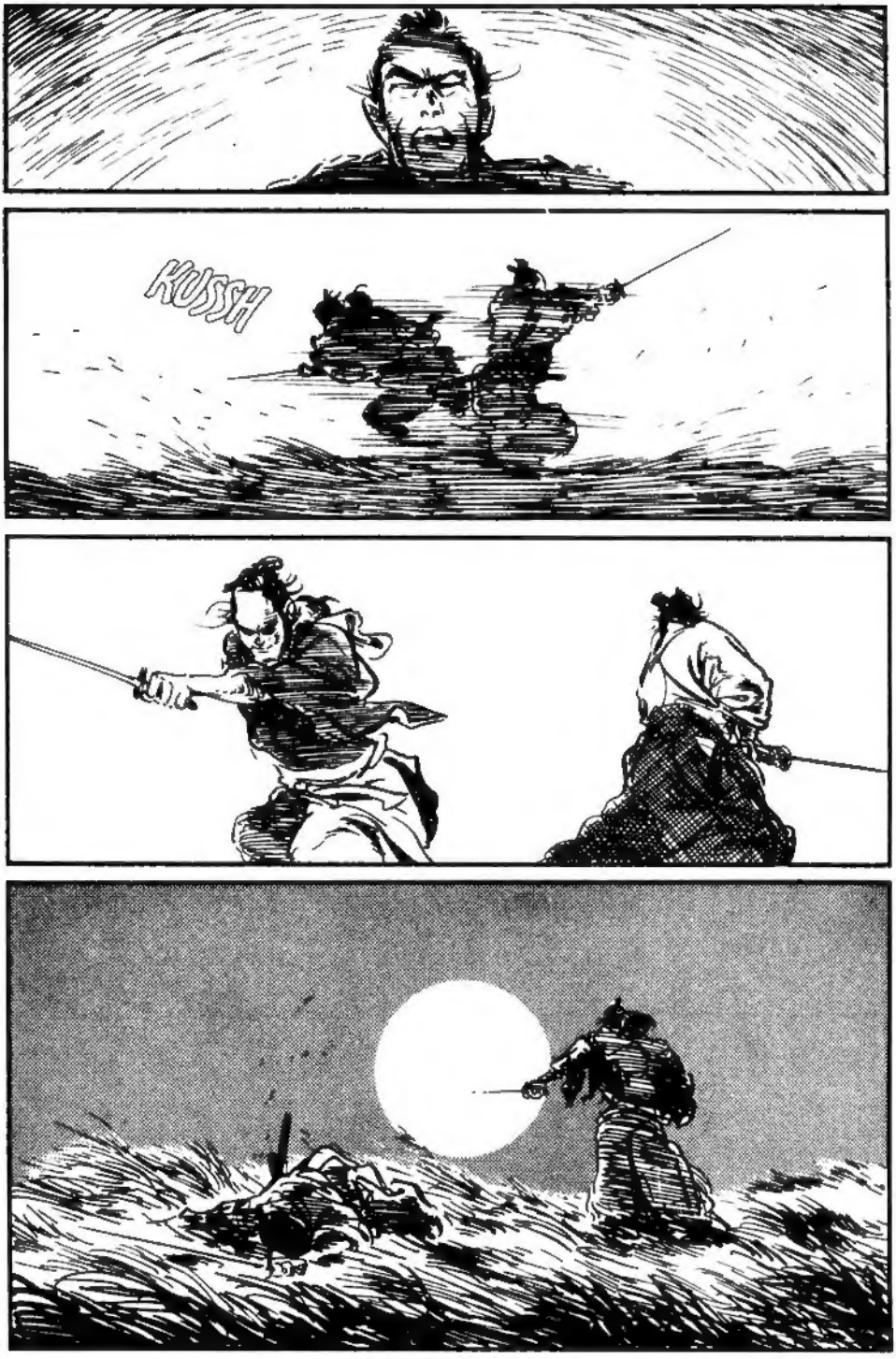
AHHH?!
HOW.. DARE YOU...
I HAVE FAITHFULLY SERVED THE HOLLYHOCK CREST OF THE SHOGUN FOR TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AND YOU FOR MORE THAN SIXTY, YAGYU.
ALL JAPAN LIVES BENEATH THIS CREST THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR DEFERS TO THIS ALONE. HEH HEH HEH HEH... IT'S TIME I GOT SOME USE OUT OF IT. HEH HEH HEH HEH...
HRNNG..
OUT OF MY WAY!

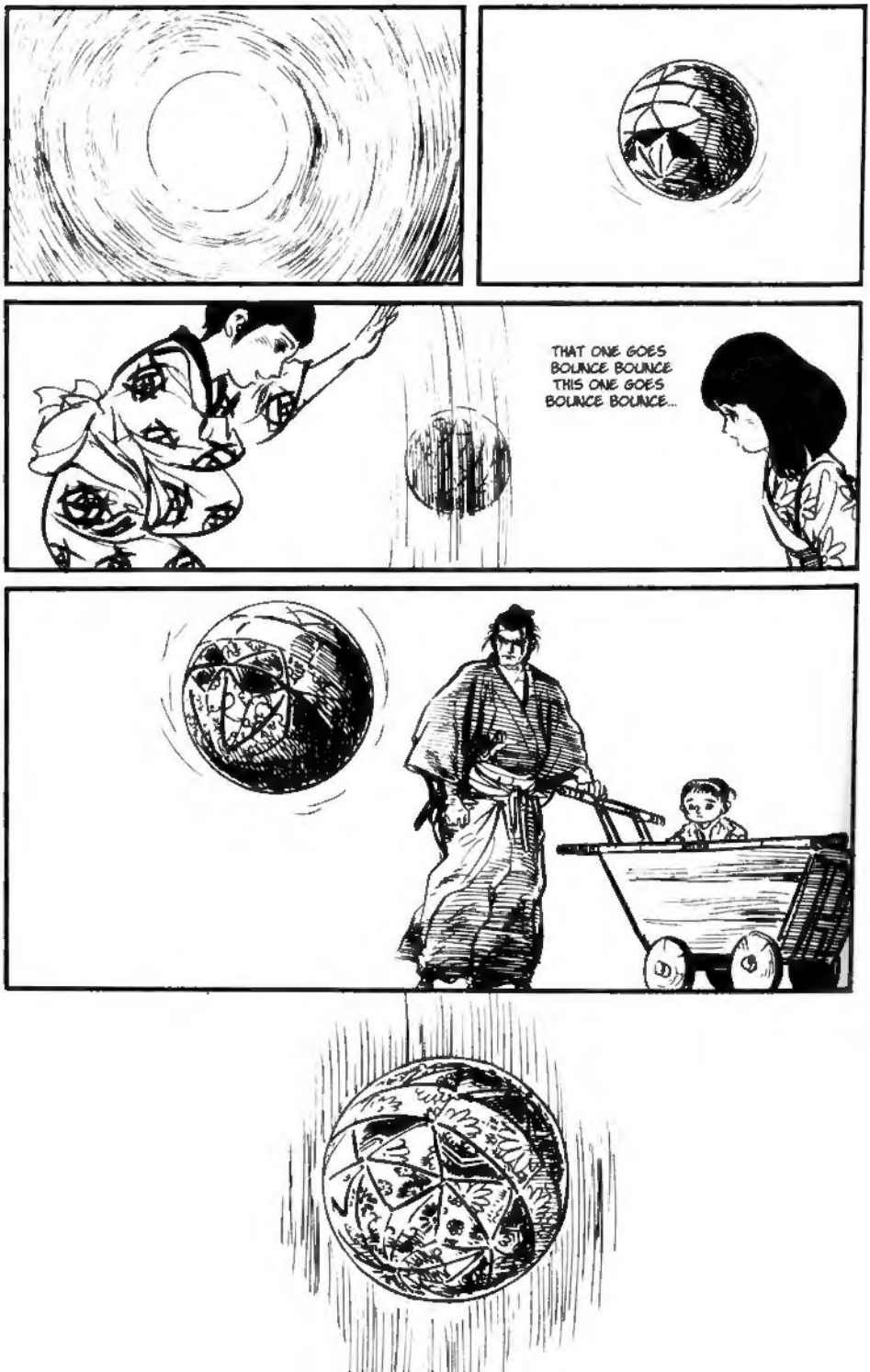
W- WAIT!
. . . .
SHED YOUR EXECUTIONER'S ROBES! DO THAT AND THE YAGYŪ CLAN SHALL CHALLENGE YOU AS KAISHAKUNIN TO A FORMAL DUEL! IF VICTORY IS YOURS, I WILL LET YOU GO ANYWHERE, DO ANYTHING, SO LONG AS YOU NEVER SET FOOT IN EDO AGAIN!
AND IF I SAY... NO?
THE ASSASSINS OF THE YAGYŪ CLAN SHALL PURSUE YOU TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH
LO- LORD YAGYŪ, YOU MUSTN'T PERVERT THE SHOGUN'S WILL! THIS PROMISE CANNOT STAND!
SILENCE!! ALL RESPONSIBILITY RESTS WITH ME!
IF HE ABUSES THE CREST, IF THIS SCANDAL SPREADS, IT WILL SHAKE THE VERY AUTHORITY OF THE SHOGUNATE ITSELF!
WELL?!
...I ACCEPT


FOR CENTURIES, THE TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE CONTROLLED THE DAIMYŌ LORDS OF JAPAN'S UNRULY HAN WITH AN IRON FIST. THE SLIGHTEST SIGN OF DEFIANCE COULD COST A DAIMYŌ HIS TITLE AND HIS LANDS, HIS FAMILY NAME COULD BE ABOLISHED, AND THE LORD HIMSELF BROUGHT TO EDO CASTLE FOR DEATH BY SEPPUKU. IN TIME, THREE SPECIAL AGENCIES AROSE TO ENFORCE THIS REIGN OF TERROR. FIRST, THE NINJA SPY NETWORK KNOWN AS THE O-NIWABAN, OR GARDEN WARDENS, DEDICATED TO UNCOVERING EVIDENCE FOR BLACKMAILING AND DESTROYING TROUBLESOME HAN. SECOND, THE SHOGUN'S SECRET ASSASSINS, CHARGED WITH KILLING ANY HAN OFFICIAL WHO OBSTRUCTED THE SHOGUNATE'S WILL. AND LAST, THE KAISHAKUNIN, THE DESIGNATED SECOND AND FINAL EXECUTIONER AT A DAIMYŌ'S SEPPUKU DEATH.
UNDER THE UNCOMPROMISING CODE OF BUSHIDŌ, THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR, IT WAS UNTHINKABLE FOR A DAIMYŌ'S RETAINER TO TURN HIS SWORD UPON HIS MASTER, EVEN TO END THE AGONY OF SEPPUKU. AND THUS THE SHOGUN APPOINTED HIS OWN CHOSEN KAISHAKUNIN TO PERFORM THE FINAL CUT FOR A DISHONORED LORD. THIS EXECUTIONER WAS ALLOWED TO BEAR THE HOLLYHOCK CREST OF THE TOKUGAWA CLAN ITSELF ON HIS ROBES OF OFFICE, SYMBOLIZING THAT IT WAS THE SHOGUN ALONE WHO HAD THE POWER TO BEHEAD THE DAIMYŌ OF JAPAN. FOR THE SHOGUN'S SPIES, THE KUROKAWA CLAN FOR HIS ASSASSINS, THE YAGYŪ CLAN. AND FOR HIS KAISHAKUNIN EXECUTIONER, THE ŌGAMI CLAN. TOGETHER, THESE THREE SHADOW ENFORCERS OF THE SHOGUN'S WILL STRUCK TERROR INTO THE HEARTS OF JAPAN'S DAIMYŌ. YET HISTORY TELLS US THAT IN 1655, THE YEAR OF MEIRIKI, THE ŌGAMI CLAN VANISHED COMPLETELY, AND THE YAGYŪ CLAN ALSO ASSUMED THE POST OF KAISHAKUNIN. AND THEN, IN 1681, IN THE FIRST YEAR OF TENNA, AT THE CHANGING OF ITS LEADERSHIP, THE YAGYŪ CLAN, TOO, COMES TO AN END...
ASSASSIN AND EXECUTIONER! THIS STORY, "LONE WOLF AND CUB," IS ONE ANSWER TO THIS MYSTERY
HEH HEH HEH... KURATO HAS THE SETTING SUN AT HIS BACK... AND ŌGAMI ITTŌ HIS SON AT HIS..


HEH HEH HEH... NEITHER FIGHTS ALONE, YET THE OUTCOME IS CLEAR!
WHEN SKILL IS EQUAL, VICTORY GOES TO THE LAY OF THE LAND AND THE FORCES OF NATURE...
DAIGORO! WE ENTER MEIFUMADŌ!
SKSSH
SKASH
SKASH

SKSH
SKSH
SKSH
SKSH
SKSH
SKSH
FASSH!!


KUSSH


THAT ONE GOES
BOUNCE BOUNCE
THIS ONE GOES
BOUNCE BOUNCE...

GLOSSARY

ashigaru
A foot soldier in the employ of a *daimyō*. lowest of the warrior ranks.

bangashira
Commander of the guard. Each han had a standing guard — the *ban* — of samurai to protect the lord and castle. The *ō-bangashira* was the supreme commander of the guard, the general of the *han* army.

bushi
A samurai. A member of the warrior class.

dai-metsuke
Chief inspector. The supreme inspector of the shogunate, the Herbert Hoover of the Tokugawa power structure.

daikan
The primary local representative of the shogunate in territories outside of the capital of Edo. The *daikan* and his staff collected taxes owed to Edo and oversaw public works, agriculture, and other projects administered by the central government.

daikansho
The office of the *daikan*.

daimyō
A feudal lord.

danzai
The samurai's right to put to death anyone who insulted their honor.

deiri
A fight between rival *yakuza* gangs. From their clothes, speech, and greetings, it is clear that the house of Jizō are *yakuza*, Japan's criminal syndicates. In the Edo period, *yakuza* were a common part of the landscape, running houses of gambling and prostitution. As long as they did not overstep their bounds, they were tolerated by the authorities, a tradition little changed in modern Japan.

dono
A term of respect for a higher-ranking official or aristocrat. A more common term of respect among civilians is *sama*, indicating more respect than the most common *san*.

dōtanūki
A battle sword, literally, "sword that cuts through torsos."

Edo
The capital of medieval Japan.

fudasashi
Merchant houses specializing in rice. They loaned gold to *han* governments, loans secured by the *han's* projected rice revenues.